ABSTRACT

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ANCESTRAL PRESENCE AND EPIC FULFILLMENT IN TONI MORRISON 'S BELOVED AND SULA

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The focal point of this study is the examination of ancestral remembrance and the effects of that presence on the epic fulfillmeht of the female heroic characters in two of Toni Morrison's novels Beloved and Sula. As a comparative study, this dissertation concerns itself with identifying the common cultural assumptions, values and traditions attributed to the African world and the African Americans illustrated in two of Morrison's novels. To this end, the ontological principles that unify African world culture and the accompanying cosmological categories delineate the discussion of motifs, images, and archetypes employed by Morrison to invoke the ancestral presence. Moreover, this study explores the use of ritual defined by deliberate rhetoric that frames apocalyptic ideas and advances epic achievement.

ANCESTRAL PRESENCE AND EPIC FULFILLMENT IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED AND SULA

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There has traditionally been a strong didactic element in African American literature from its beginning. At the core of the instruction is the idea that African people must hold fast to African beliefs and traditions through the ravages of time measured by captivity. This successive acknowledgement dramatically emerges in the work of twentieth century women writers from Zora Neale Hurston to Toni Morrison[1] who have recorded and reflected upon elements from the past that continue to inform a vital part of contemporary life. Using writing to replicate the sacredness and power of the spoken word, their texts are metaphors for the spiritual drum beats whose impulses convey that which is necessary and meaningful for continued survival of the community.

Toni Morrison continues to mount a strong cultural offensive using the blueprint designed by her literary

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[1]Although most biographical information records her as being born Chloe Anthony Wofford, her mother states that she was named Chloe Ardelia Wofford after her maternal grandmother, Ardelia Willis. In an interview in the Lorain Journal, Morrison's mother says that Morrison changed her name to Toni after having converted to Catholicism while at Howard University. St. Anthony was the name that she took for her confirmation that was subsequently shortened to Toni. Clare Ansberry, "Toni Morrison's Mom Recalls Storytelling Days in Lorain," Lorain Journal 12 January 1982,: 5:1.

forebears earning her not only accolades in the form of literary honors from established authorities[2] but also the respect of the African world community. With her singular ability to weave magical spells using the lyrical incantations of everyday words, her utterances are transformed into rich narratives that provide the reader with living testaments to construct self-defined realities. Rooted in the authority of the cultural bard or *griotte*[3], she preserves in her memory the symbols that give life to the community.

Like most African art, her literary works are generated by creative inspiration that displays a

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[2]Awards include: Nobel Prize for Literature (1993); the Modern Language Association of American Commonwealth Award in Literature (1989); Sarah Lee Corporation Front Runner Award in the Arts (1989); Pulitzer Prize for fiction [Beloved]; Ansfeild Wolf Book Award in Race Relations (1988); The Cleveland Arts Prize in Literature (1978); the Distinguished Writer Award of 1978 from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; National Book Critic's Circle Award and the National Book Award for best novel for the Song of Solomon (1977).

[3]A "griotte" is the female counterpart of the male griot (bard or singer) who culturally preserves the group by making her audience conscious of not only history but cultural norms, values, and expectations. In the West African countries of Senegal and the Gambia, the "griotte " recounts genealogies, sings praises, and chants epics at important events such as the installation of rulers, weddings, and naming ceremonies. As part of her ritual she not only chants the names of the honorees and the participants (which would be referred to in the Western sense as spectators). She ties "now" events to "past" events and engenders the future by invoking the names of her community, recounting stories,and providing shared memorates (stories of memory). These ritualized activities generates the cohesion necessary for group survival.

familiarity with the innerworkings of the "spirit" world. Translating the signs and symbols that come to African people as gifts from cultural and familial ancestors, she crafts text into living testimony offering heroism as possibility in the lives of ordinary people.

One of the subsidiary points of this study is identity and how these ordinary people are challenged by its consideration. The novels of Toni Morrison deal with issues of identity of African Americans and their focused exchanges with historical, cultural, spiritual and psychic forces within the context of the American experience. Defined by a dynamic cultural awareness of the ancestor which reflects an African world view, her novels provide values, expectations, and norms for the community of readers. Morrison is what Mobley calls a "cultural archivist" and "redemptive scribe"[4] who presents the journeys of fictional heroes as they move from conflict to epic fulfillment. Using archetypes and images drawn from the complexities and contradictions of a transplanted African world psyche, her novels reflect the cultural exigency of identity which forms the basis of her plots. Elliot Butler

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[4]Marilyn Sanders Mobley, Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison: The Cultural Function of Narrative (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1991) 1.

Evans identifies the raw material of Morrison's narrative as, "an anterior Black reality."[5] At the fore of this black reality is the enduring struggle for self-definition and self determination as characters strive to name and engage reality.

In The Bluest Eye, her first novel, Morrison invites us to look at the "contorted" or "confused" self in need of authentication. In Sula, she extends this identity quest by rendering a tale of conflict between individual and communal identities. At the core of her next novel Song of Solomon, is a focus on the necessity of constructing an identity in the absence of a collective familial history. Tar Baby presents a struggle with class identity and community responsibility while Beloved's theme addresses the potency of memory in restoring fragmented identities. Her most recent novel, Jazz focuses on the main character's attempt to recapture her former self, the one her husband loved before he "fell for an eighteen year-old with one of those deepdown spooky loves."

It is equally important to note the motif of community which is pervasive in Morrison's novels. African thought posits that an important part of the

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[5]Elliott Butler-Evans, Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989) 59.

definition of an individual is his or her connection to the community. This community is defined in a cyclical sense and consists of beings referred to by Kagame as *Muntu* (plural: Bantu). Explaining this concept Janheinz Jahn offers, "*Muntu* embraces living and dead, ancestors and deified ancestors: gods. The unity expressed by the inclusive concept of *Muntu* is one of the characteristics of African culture, and further peculiarities are derived from it."[6]

This community is given voice and audience as it serves the role of mediator, ordering and balancing the actions of its members. The community, thus personified, assumes the shape of a character who takes strong moral stances and defines the "village's" collective direction. This is congruous with what John Mbiti reports about traditional African society. He says, "The community is above the individual."[7]

This essential role of community works in concert with the concept of resurrected ancestors. For it is in the bosom of the community that ancestors are nurtured. In Africa besides individual and familial ancestors there are also collective ancestors

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[6]Janheinz Jahn, Muntu: African Culture and the Western World, trans. Marjorie Grene, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961) 18.

[7]John S. Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, 2nd rev.ed.(London: Heinemann, 1991) 178.

celebrated at festivals, harvests, and other communal events.[8] The appearance of the ancestor is a major component that reflects the African world thought governing Morrison's literary journeys. Toni Morrison's novels are events, a kind of archeological expedition where she digs up African cultural rudiments, interprets them, points to their significance, and catalogs them according to what is mutually healing and unifying for African people.

The cyclical African world, constructs, defines and informs the deeper heroic struggles of the characters. The conflicts are clearly drawn by depicting the characters involved in conflicts that divide them from the community. This separation from the village is usually symptomatic of their separation from their ancestors. It is Morrison's clear and consistent African world sensibilities rooted in the tradition of orature[9] that provide a sturdy bridge that connects her heroes back to their center. With

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[8]These delineations also refer to ritual enactment. Malidoma Soma notes in Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community that there are three levels of ritualized behavior that accompany the worship of ancestors and other spirits. There are individual, familial, and community. All of them are interdependent; each one allows the other to work effectively.

[9]For the purpose of this discussion orature is defined as prose writing that maintains the cadences, improvisatory quality, and dynamic impact of the spoken word.

the assistance of cultural images, myths, and archetypes, her characters, forcefully drawn and accented through mythopoeic structures, either invoke the ancestor and achieve wholeness or deny her presence and fail in this self-realization. This allegiance to the resurrection of the ancestor as a major trope is part of the deep structure of African American literature and connects Morrison with both her literary forerunners and successors.

Also evident in her novels are elements that identify her heroines more with African than European models. Morrison, as cultural bard locates her narratives in an African ethos which supplies the symbols and images that map her literary terrain. Her congruity with African culture is significant in light of the complex inheritance of African people in America whose unique culture reflects both an African base of spiritual myth, symbolism, song and story and a fusion of Euro-American attitudes and beliefs. I argue that in her symbolic narratives the Euro-American elements[10] represent only the surface structure informing superficial manifestations of culture. The deep and abiding stratum of meaning is supplied by the profundity of the African worldview. The cultural ties

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[10]For a discussion of these influences see, David Cowart, "Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison's Song of Solomon," American Literature 1 (1990): 86-100.

that bind the African inter-continentally are confirmed in Morrison's narratives and are referred to by Mobley as, "powerful forms of cultural intervention."[11] Morrison writes in response to a deep sense of loss and dislocation and with a strong mission to "transform the community by reclaiming the forgotten myths, traditions and values."[12]

Tales of these journeys sculpted from metaphor and myth and engraved with archetypal etchings, furnish an authentic view of African American people through Morrison's precise narrative documentation. The study examines and analyzes the significance of motifs, symbols, images and archetypes and their relation to the achievement of epic realization or fulfillment through an ancestral presence.

The spiritual and cultural continuities of Africa in the literary vistas of Toni Morrison offer a portrait of the bi-dimensionality of the African psyche. The interdependent relationship between the ancestral and living spheres, highlighted by Morrison's consideration further advances the African worldview. These realizations will be examined in light of larger questions raised regarding social, cultural, and spiritual matters reflected in Morrison's novels.

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[11]Mobley 25-26.

[12]Mobley 100.

These concerns manifest themselves into several mythic patterns that repeatedly emerge. They are:

(1) the quest for identity and a sense of familial history;

(2) the power of unseen forces;

(3) the need for ancestral communion;

(4) the need for spiritual, psychic, and physical wholeness;

(5) the primacy of love as a universal force, both human and cosmic;

(6) the need for harmonious relationships.

Morrison's prolific use of archetypes allows both hero and reader to find their way on the journey to the wellsprings of "truth" as the themes are worked out through female heroic action.

In addition, fitted into the context of analysis is a brief examination of her rhetoric which invokes the ancestral presence. This "collective remembering"[13] expressed in the careful orality of her narratives serves to provide harmony and meaning in the face of systematic oppression. Morrison creates unique voices with rich language that fits African American

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[13]Collective remembering is here defined as the conscious historical and cultural knowledge common to a group of people. This shared knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation through the use of traditional oral forms. It is a function of the telling of stories, repetition of toasts, playing the dozens and "signifyin'" among others, that provides living testaments to insure the continued survival of the group.

literary discourse into oral shapes. Through orature Morrison shares some responsibility of mythmaking with her readers. Through loosely sketched structures, she empowers readers to make their own myths and to construct their own brand of morality as she crafts memorable characters. Using what seems at first to be elementary plots, her narratives provide a complex set of actions. Morrison unveils her characters by employing the symbols accessible to her reader's cultural background. Her precise diction assists readers in determining the significance of the heroic outcomes to them. This is similar to African oral epics where the tasks of identifying the hero and determining the moral value belong not to the poet but to the audience.

In Black Women Writers 1950-1980, Morrison addresses the oral quality of African and African American literature asserting that it "has the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence and be heard as well."[14] She adds:

> To make a story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken-to have the reader feel the narrator without identifying the narrator or having him knock about and to have the

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[14]Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Mari Evans, ed., Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation (New York: Anchor, 1984) 341.

> reader work with the author in the construction of the book-is what's important. What is left out is as important as what is there.[15]

Commenting on the importance of audience participation, She stresses, "I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance. . . "[16]

Critic, poet, and griot, Eugene B. Redmond suggests that the purpose for Morrison's orature, "is for spell-casting, fetish, mask, and *gris gris* making with the intent of cultural placement."[17] For the most part this placement is defined by women and their issues. In Render Me My Song, Sandi Russell notes that Morrison writes for African women.[18] Russell further states that Morrison does this as a way of acknowledging her debt to female family members for the

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[15]Morrison, "Rootedness" 341.

[16]Morrison, "Rootedness" 341. A similar idea is expressed by Portia Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Music," Africanisms in American Culture, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 188. Maultsby states, "The audience/congregation is encouraged to participate in any way, sometimes to even join the performers on stage."

[17]Redmond, Eugene. Telephone interview. 10 October 1993.

[18]Sandi Russell, Render Me My Song (New York: St. Martin, 1990) 93.

strength that she has personally drawn from them.[19] While this study mainly focuses on Morrison's use of female archetypes, male archetypes are alluded to in relation to the achievement of female heroic virtue. In her novels, for the most part, the actions of female characters become the standard for defining the heroic quests and the touchstone for measuring appropriate behavior.

Like African American female "storytellers" that precede her: Frances E. W. Harper, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Pauline Hopkins and her contemporaries, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, and Alice Walker, she must tell the stories on her own terms on behalf of the community. Speaking of the importance of "storytelling" Marjorie Bard writes:

> Telling another person is the first step toward social change. Telling people who share similar problems in a group setting is often what is needed to begin a campaign in which activism is realized.[20]

Morrison's "storying" is rooted in the oral tradition of the epic and as such the purpose of her "storying" is suggested by John W. Roberts. He notes that the epic is a literary vehicle that allows a

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[19]Russell 93.

[20]Marjorie Bard, "Relating Intrapersonal Storying (Idionarrating) and Interpersonal Communicating," Southern Folklore 49 (1992): 70.

people to gain self-esteem and self-inspiration. He contends that through heroic action there is a transmission of values that promotes group survival.[21]

This notion of survival is consistent with Morrison's work and is of special significance when viewed in light of her first novel, The Bluest Eye. Published at the height of the Black Arts Movement, this novel was compatible with the ideas of the period. Employing the self-authenticating trope of the movement and self-validating folkloric foundations, Morrison's novel reflected the beliefs and idiom of African American people who challenged definitions offered by "others." David Smith in "The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics" noted the important difference in the writing of that movement and previous black writers to be that, "Black Arts writing directly addresses a black audience."[22]

Morrison addresses this African American audience as a revisionist attempting to vindicate and define the African American experience. With specific emphasis on the revision of the African American woman's experience, she speaks candidly, face to face to her

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[21]John W. Roberts, From Trickster To Badman:The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989) 5.

[22]David L. Smith, "The Black Arts Movement and its Critics," American Literary History 3 (1991): 102.

people. Seeking to adjudicate African Americans, Morrison speaks as a poet in the "one" tongue constructed from common experiences which allows her to be understood by her audience. In the Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition, Bernard Bell notes the significance of the pattern of shared conditions and circumstances that gave root to African American writings, particularly the novel. Bell writes:

> The network of understanding that defines black American culture and informs black American consciousness has evolved from the unique pattern of experiences of black people in North America. . . These experiences--of Africa, the trans-Atlantic or Middle Passage, slavery, Southern plantation tradition, emancipation, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, Northern migration, urbanization, and racism--have produced a residue of shared memories and frames of references for black Americans.[23]

As a means of communicating these experiences noted by Bell, Morrison uses images, archetypes, and ritual along with the myths that structure these collective remembrances of African American people in a context of epic design. Like the traditional bards, Morrison works on her own artistic terms to define the collective conflicts, identify the hero, and to decide the novels' outcomes which reconfigure the

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[23]Bernard W. Bell, The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition (Amherst, Massachusetts: U of Massachusetts P, 1987, 5.

possibilities for the African American community--the female in particular.

She constructs a rich "oral" text that makes the reader comfortable with the cultural nuances that inform the folklore and folkways of African American society. Through prose Morrison teaches much about the indomitable human spirit. This is done for larger-than-textual reasons. Morrison, as an image maker, embarks on these literary quests not only for self-hood but as an insistent search for the collective definition of African people in America. As a literary griotte, she keeps "readers" alive by creating a place for them to see themselves in fiction. As a result of the participatory nature of African culture, the reader is led to epic fulfillment along with the heroic character.

The use of an epic design validates the cultural imperatives by which Morrison is motivated. Dan Ben-Amos stresses the value that epics provide to the society. He says:

> The possession of epic poetry had a value in itself, as it testified to the antiquity of both literary creativity and ethnic self-definition of a nation and, this enabled a society to take its place as a equal member in the literary political roundtable of nations.[24]

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[24]Dan Ben-Amos, ed., Introduction. "Epic and Panegyric Poetry in Africa," spec. issue of Research in African Literatures 14 (Fall 1983): 278.

The importance of Morrison's mythopoeic and epic vision is further suggested by Isidore Okpewho who proposes, "Under the circumstances of a possible cultural extinction, the mythmaker may adjust the details of his native cosmology or seek a fresh base for the cultural symbols of his crumbling world."[25] Undoubtedly, historical events coupled with the recent integration of ethnic groups in America, coinciding with the beginning of her literary career, provided fertile ground for a rededication to cultural ideas. Responding to the challenges issued by the nationalists, Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad, whose political movements accompanied by ideologies of racial separation called for political and cultural autonomy, Morrison seeks to ward off the destruction of African American culture. Armed with the novel as a reconstructed epic, Morrison mounts a cultural offensive to address this challenge. In an interview essay in Black Women Writers: 1950-1980, Morrison explains her position:

> "For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer *exclusively* ours; we don't have exclusive rights to it. Other people play it and sing it; it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere. So another form has to take that place, and it seems to

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[25]Isidore Okpewho, "The Anthropologist Looks at Epic." Research in African Literatures 11 (Winter 1980): 429.

> me that the novel is needed by African Americans now in the way that it was not needed before--and it is following along the lines of the function of novels everywhere."[26]

Morrison makes a cogent case for the necessity of having a culturally distinct identity. Clearly, the heroic characters portrayed in her novels are examples of that commitment. However, because of the substantial complexity of the study, limited attention is given to the examination of the epic. Its narrative elements, poetic nuances, and archetypes will be analyzed only when necessary to establish the provenance or significance of an African motif found in Morrison's work.

Furthermore, this study employs a primarily cultural methodology using a composite of mythic, feminist, and Afrocentric criticism, placed within an interdisciplinary frame consisting of historical, anthropological, and folkloric material. Although Morrison's use of cultural traditions, thematic concerns, and ideological perspectives are documented, the major focus of this study is to examine the relationship of the ancestors or ancestral remembrances to the quest defined by myth and sustained by primarily female archetypes, images and ritualistic practices. The inquiry is structured by means of descriptive

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[26]Morrison, "Rootedness" 340.

analysis of elements typifying the African world and their significance to thematic concerns in two of her novels, Beloved and Sula. These two novels are chosen to highlight the contrast in outcomes for the heroic characters Sethe and Sula attributed to their relationship to the ancestral presence represented by Baby Suggs and Eva respectively.

Chapter One reviews the historical, political, and cultural events that shape Morrison's artistry. Further it discusses the scope and purposes of this dissertation and provides the methodological and philosophical considerations. **Chapter Two** focuses on the African philosophical foundations and theoretical frames that culturally inform the discussion of Morrison's literature; included is a discussion of Morrison's sense of cultural agency, cultural structures, epic models, and a deliberation on the significance of the ancestral presence. **Chapter Three** explores the dominant image of memory, mythic concerns, and characterization of African archetypes in Beloved. The chapter centers on the significance of ancestral forces represented by Baby Suggs whose appearance is facilitated by cyclical narrative strategies and recursive literary trope. The chapter highlights how memory and ritual behavior influence the heroine Sethe as she journeys from fragmentation to recovery.

Chapter Four follows the journey of the title character, Sula, as she searches for and constructs a "self" defined by herself. Archetypes and symbols that mark her deviation from the imposed definition dictated by her community and her rejection of ancestral guidance are considered. The idea of the "living ancestor" represented by Eva is analyzed along with an examination of the Yoruba Orisha, Oya, who along with Eva is neglected because of Sula's self-absorption. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ritual drama as a cleansing, binding and communal force. **Chapter Five** concludes the discussion with the examination of thematic concerns raised in the two novels and an analysis of the significant impact that the use of African archetypes, images, ritual employed as definitive statements have had in Morrison's episodic fusion of changing narrative realities. In addition, this chapter shows the relevance of the ancestral presence in the works of other contemporary women writers.

The central research question for this dissertation is: How does Morrison's rendering of African images, spiritual archetypes and ritual evoke the ancestral presence necessary for the achievement of epic fulfillment by Morrison's female heroic characters

in Beloved and Sula? Specifically the subsidiary questions that guide the discussion are:

1. What are the ideological imperatives that motivate the creation and expression of mythic and epic consciousness in Morrison's novels?

2. What are the ontological and axiological imperatives of the female heroic characters in the novels?

3. What are the attributes, quests, and outcomes of the heroic female characters in Morrison's novels?

4. What are the dominant archetypes and images and how do they, along with ritual, further epic fulfillment?

5. How does the ancestral presence advance the overall thematic concerns raised in the narratives?

It is my intention that by providing the answers to these questions, the significance of African cultural continuities in African American literature will be underscored.

CHAPTER TWO

AFRICANISMS AND ANCESTRAL ECHOES: POSITING A CULTURAL FRAME

> **We have been believers believing in the black gods of an old land, believing in the secrets of the seeress and the magic of the charmers and the power of the devil's evil ones. . . Neither the slaver's whip nor the lyncher's rope nor the bayonet could kill our black belief.**
>
> Margaret Walker--
> "We Have Been Believers"

Morrison's use of images, archetypes and values are reflective of and consistent with an African worldview as she resurrects and highlights an ancestral figure whose purpose is to lead her heroic characters to epic completion. In this chapter, I will examine the cultural agency that informs Morrison's artistic vision, explore the African worldview and lay the foundation for the subsequent examination of these cultural principles within the text of the novels to be discussed in this study.

The cultural assumptions expressed by Morrison owe a debt to her sturdy grounding in African American culture. Harold Bloom rejects this cultural ownership. In the introduction to the "Modern Critical Views" series on Toni Morrison, edited by Bloom, he says, "Toni Morrison, in her time and place, answering to the travail of her people, speaks to the needs of an era, but her art comes out of a literary tradition not

altogether at one with her cultural politics."[1] The distinction he makes between her literary tradition and cultural politics comes from his Euro-centric insistence that her works are products of her faithfulness to European literary stylistics. He writes, "she has few affinities with Zora Neale Hurston or Ralph Ellison or with other masters of African American fiction."[2] Instead he offers, "As a novelist, a rhetorical tale-teller, Toni Morrison was found (sic) by Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, two quite incompatible artists, except perhaps for the effect that James Joyce had upon both of them."[3] Morrison would disagree. Morrison credits the language and style to her community and takes a decidedly proactive stance. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," she argues:

> If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private closed exercise of the imagination that fulfills only the obligations of my personal dreams--which is to say yes, the work must be political.[4]

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[1]Harold Bloom, ed. Introduction. Toni Morrison (New York: Chelsea, 1990), 5.

[2]Bloom 2.

[3]Bloom 3.

[4]Morrison, "Rootedness" 344-345.

For Morrison, there is no contradiction in the work's being "art". To her, art is political. What makes it political is her obstinacy in documenting in her works the ethos of her own culture. The gospel, according to Morrison is: when you share your culture and tell your story, you empower yourself and your culture. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison expresses this cultural vision in her own words stating, "When I view the world, I perceive it and write about it, it's the world of black people.[5]

Bloom's assertions exemplify the tendencies of European scholars to place the location of prominent African American artists outside of their culture. The attitude he assumes is similar to the one expressed by a European American feminist, Sara Blackburn, in a 1973 New York Times Book Review of The Bluest Eye. Blackburn writes:

> . . . Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification "black woman writer" and take her place among

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[5]Claudia Tate, ed., Black Women Writers At Work (New York: Continuum, 1983) 118. Also see Nellie McKay, "An Interview With Toni Morrison," Contemporary Literature 24 (1983): 413-29. In this interview Morrison expresses her commitment to the primacy of African culture.

> the most serious important and talented American novelists now working.[6]

Blackburn's remarks indicate that perhaps not even feminists are free from the racial fetters insisted on by the society. Her statement shows that even where gender corresponds, the overriding concern seems to be issues of race informed by culturally hegemonic motives. It would seem that to such European American feminist critics, the writings of African American women should give voice to the stories of others, not their own. In Playing in the Dark, a collection of prose essays subtitled, "Whiteness in the Literary Imagination," Morrison writes:

> My early assumptions as a reader were that Black people signified little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers- other than as the objects of an occasional bout of jungle fever, other than to provide local color or to lend some verissimultide or to supply some needed moral gesture, humor, or bit of pathos, blacks made no appearance at all.[7]

These ideas conveyed by Morrison provide the rationale for her persistence in placing African Americans at the fore of her narratives.

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[6]Sara Blackburn, "Sula," New York Times Book Review 30 Dec. 1973: 3.

[7]Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 15.

Both Bloom's and Blackburn's statements contend that the perception of success in the literary arena indicates a flight from the source of one's own culture. One of the underlying arguments for this dissertation asserts that exactly the reverse is true. It is in Morrison's tenacity in maintaining the rich historical and cultural legacies of her literary forebears that she achieves greatness. This cultural particularity, "the ability and willingness to trust her own experiences"[8] in which her narratives are moored gives her the universal quality that Bloom and Blackburn have inaccurately assessed. Ralph Ellison offers a caveat against relying on someone else's cultural imperatives. He states:

> Too many books by Negro writers are addressed to a white audience. By doing this the authors run the risk of limiting themselves to the audience's presumptions of what a Negro is or should be. . .[9]

Ralph Ellison would dismiss Blackburn's statement not only on Morrison's behalf, but for other writers as well. He remarks:

> When an African American writer places himself/herself as the focus of the literary piece it is not provincialism because the universal is only "reached through the

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[8]Ralph Ellison, Shadow And Act (New York: Vintage, 1972) 172.

[9]Ellison 170.

> depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance.[10]

Perhaps, Morrison expressed these sentiments best when she said, "When I wrote I wanted not to have to explain. Somehow, when black writers wrote for themselves I understood it better... When the locality is clear, fully realized, then it becomes universal."[11] She points out this culturally proactive stance that governs her artistry. She stresses:

> We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experiences of those with whom we have come in contact. . .And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the 'raceless' one with which we are, all of us, most familiar.[12]

The cultural expressions of Africans in America are examinations of those centers. A combination of African cultural continuities which critiques the psychic response to domination, exploitation, and resistance provides the core of the literature. In

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[10]Ellison 170.

[11]Toni Morrison, interview, Conversations with American Writers, by Charles Ruas, (New York: Knopf, 1987) 6.

[12]Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro American Presence in American Literature," Michigan Quarterly Review 38 (1989): 9.

addition, regard for the deprecation of the African past is forcefully addressed.

In the attempt to locate folkloric and mythic elements of Toni Morrison's novels and establish the relationship of these two components as extensions of African American antecedents and African world thought, one must look beyond the boundaries of Western culture. For when the connections are extended beyond their Western frontiers and the sources of the syncretic components are discussed, a more complete portrait of African archetypes and images in Morrison's works can be rendered. To this end, an examination of the cultural imperatives that drive Morrison's inclusion of African cultural models as well as a discussion of those models will be furnished in this discussion.

Most myth critics usually skirt the issue of African cultural heritage, instead they emphasize mythic foundations informed by an European worldview. They usually refer to Jungian classifications suggested by a European perspective and bolstered by Greek and Judeo-Christian sensibilities. An example of this culturally contexualized perspective can be found in Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism. Based on Jungian principles, it is considered to be a stellar reference point for myth critics. In speaking on the theory of archetypal meaning, demonic images in particular, Frye

says, "In religion the spiritual world is a reality distinct from the physical world."[13] This statement, presented as an *a priori* assumption, guides the direction of criticism of many myth critics who proceed from this "truth" and posit archetypal interpretations of literature based on these kinds of faulty "universal" suppositions. But, how could it inform the interpretation of African world literature? In most African traditional religions, the delineation between the spiritual and material world is not arranged in such a severe frame. Another illustration of Euro-solipsistic myth criticism can be found in distinctions made by Jung concerning the "primitive" and "civilized" mentalities. This diametrically constructed orientation is evidenced in the following statement:

> Primitive mentality differs from civilized chiefly in that the conscious mind is far less developed in extent and intensity. Functions such as thinking, willing etc. are not yet differentiated. . .[The primitive] is incapable of any conscious effort of will. . . owing to the chronic twilight state of his conscious, it is often next to impossible to find out whether he merely dreamed something or whether he really experienced it. . .[14]

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[13]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973) 38.

[14]C. G. Jung and C Kerenji, Introduction to a Science of Mythology, trans. R.F.C. Hull, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 101. qtd. in Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (New York: Cambridge UP, 1976) 35.

Wole Soyinka in Myth, Literature and The African World, notes that this differentiation of the nature of archetype between the "primitive" and "civilized" mind misrepresents the "universality of a collective consciousness"[15] the premise of Jung's argument. Given the kind of hierarchal distinction suggested by Jung's statement, I would argue for the need of reference points for African based literature to be drawn from the culture itself. The Afrocentric focus that I am suggesting does not preclude the inclusion of mythic ideas and ideals espoused by thinkers such as Jung or Frye, but instead situates these perspectives within the cultural frame of the African worldview wherever appropriate and applicable.

This worldview bears witness to the strength of the survivors of one of the most cruel systems of human oppression witnessed in human history. The arrival of captive Africans on the shores of North America, their enslavement, and their continued survival represents a journey of remarkable resiliency. Besides the enslaving of African people, the deliberate mission of Europeans included the dehumanization of African people, by attempting to wipe out their traditions, to substitute their language, and to destroy their culture.

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[15]Wole Soyinka 35.

The experience of Africans in America has been a quintessential example of adaptation in the face of adversity. Through the tenacious practice of culture, Africans have endured in America. That they managed a measure of cultural integrity is a tribute to the dynamic role that culture plays on the lives of people. Culture is the medium through which humans exercise their humanity and express their view of reality. As a response to challenges insisted on by the harsh environment, the brutal physical abuse by their captors, and the psychological disintegration produced by the chaos of the unfamiliar, the Africans reached deep within themselves where the roots of culture abide. This renewal of spiritual and psychic energies with its attempt at wholeness was aided by syncretic processes that allowed enslaved Africans to establish familiar and intelligible patterns through maintaining and preserving their identities and ancestral heritage.

Testimony to this ancestral heritage is observed most notably in the spiritual practices as well as music, dance, and language.[16] It is the continuity of African culture coupled with the arduous experience of struggle in America that informs poems, prayers, and

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[16]In the African sense music, dance, drama, and language are spiritual practices as there are no clearly drawn lines dividing notions of sacred, secular, or profane.

groans of the African American. Heard in the work songs of the laborers, the conjures of "root workers," and sermons of the preachers, African culture also makes its presence known in the written literature. Blassingame comments on the importance of tradition with regard to survival. He writes:

> Clearly, one of the general means by which Africans resisted bondage was by maintaining their link with the past. Rather than accept the slaveholder's view of his place in society, the African tried to hold onto (sic) cultural determinants of his status.[17]

The status that Blassingame speaks of does not concern their position as captives; the Africans, unlike their captors, were women and men of import in the African communities they left behind. They were priestesses and priests, queen-mothers and kings, griottes and griots, conjurers, blacksmiths, architects, and agricultural experts. They had been educated in the traditional fashion of their respective cultures. Thrust as they were into this malevolent environment, their only freedoms were mental. They held tenaciously to their cultural remembrances and stored them protectively in memory. These resources were collectively shared and the combined wisdom was embodied in the folklore of the enslaved Africans.

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[17]John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community (New York: Oxford UP, 1972) 25.

These survivals testify to the adaptability of African people. It is well documented that the drum was outlawed,[18] names were changed, and many traditional practices had to be adapted in such a way that their meaning was not recognizable by the enslavers. Many of the Africanisms were codified in the folkways of African people, especially the expression of spirituality. The intense need for the expression of spirituality reflected the continuity of beliefs transported from Africa. This spiritual aspiration was encoded in the folklore. In Puttin' On Ole Massa Gilbert Osofsky affirms this adaptability:

> If one is to ever know about their visions, their quests, their mind; it is necessary to turn to the oral record: the songs, spirituals, and folktales that were collected in the nineteenth century and remain alive at this very moment.[19]

As a way to affirm one's own culture while at the same time rejecting European cultural domination, African people in America have repeatedly argued through folklore the existence in America of a dynamic African culture. It is the oral tradition, the vehicle of folklore, that has allowed the African to pass the

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[18]Louisiana was the only state in America where drums were not outlawed.

[19]Gilbert Osofsky, ed. Puttin' On Ole Massa:The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, And Solomon Northrup (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 45.

collective wisdom and cultural mores to the subsequent generations. Smitherman stresses this idea:

> The oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for "gettin' ovuh." That tradition preserves the African American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race through song, story, folk sayings, and rich verbal interplay among everyday people. Lessons and precepts about life and survivals are handed down from generation to generation. We rely on word of mouth for its rituals of cultural preservation.[20]

Using the artifice of the folkloric tradition, Morrison presents this oral culture as both weapon and tool of preservation. Her mandate and primary responsibility is to establish a cultural matrix for African American women's fiction. This is achieved as she uses folklore as the principal means of establishing "realistic characters." By restoring a tradition, the past and subsequently the future is invented through the power of words. It is in her primary allegiance to the language that her folkloric intent is showcased. Through the conjuring of language, she connects the "spirit world with the earthly world. As word weaver, she makes language and tradition into one phenomenon stronger than the two elements alone.

As a model for cultural preservation, folklore is the location for the restorative values that bring one

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[20]Geneva Smitherman, Talkin' and Testifyin' (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) 73.

back to the center because it (folklore) helps one to develop pride in cultural heritage and provides the necessary support for the telling of one's story as it maintains the link with the past. These goals are achieved in folklore by providing myths to sustain the psyche, creating motifs that make the telling of each story fresh, and by furnishing the essential symbols to bring the group's beliefs to the fore.[21]

Ralph Ellison records in, Shadow and Act "that myth and ritual are used in literature to give form and significance to the material"[22] as they are true portraits of how people function in everyday life. He continues this analysis saying, "The rituals become social forms, and it is one of the functions of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of art."[23] This explanation not only supplies a basis for life but a way to remove the yoke of cultural estrangement and negation. Ellison further states, "Folklore projects the wisdom in symbols which express the groups' will to survive. It embodies those values

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[21]Charles Chesnutt provides a nurturing place for the authentication of folklore. In his commitment to showcase "the best people," he chooses the folkloric structure as a worthy modality to demonstrate the validity of African Americans.

[22]Ellison, Shadow 174.

[23]Ellison, Shadow 174.

by which the group lives and dies."[24] There has evolved a picture of survival grounded in a creative philosophy that affirms the spirit of survival. As Fanon explains, "The nation gathers together the various indispensable elements necessary for the creation of a culture, those elements which alone can give it credibility, validity, life, and creative power."[25]

Ellison stresses that the historical use of folklore "was an act of courageous expression." It stated "the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than to allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him."[26] For it was only when African Americans participated in the folkloric tradition that they operated within the boundaries of communally sanctioned behavior that was healing and cathartic. With a modicum of freedom from acculturative influences, folklore functions as a coping mechanism that reflects the group's willingness to survive. It embodies the African's firm grip on her cultural identity--the legacy of Africa.

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[24]Ellison, Shadow 171.

[25]Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of The Earth, trans. Constance Farrington, (New York: Grove, 1968) 245.

[26]Ellison, Shadow 173.

The folklore of the enslaver operates from a different set of premises and definitions than the enslaved. In his essay, "The Problems of the Negro Writer," Redding agrees with Ellison when he grants that African Americans "preserved their race pride and dignity by dealing with the folk tradition."[27] That they were able to do this can be explained by the subversive function and restorative nature and tradition of folklore. Redding explains, "We wear the mask that does not dare to reveal to whites things about themselves that they do not face."[28] In a 1985 interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison comments on this mask. She says, "There is a mask that sometimes exists when black people talk to white people. Somehow it seems to me that it spilled over into the fiction."[29]

In The Hero and the Blues, Murray notes the importance of these restorative and subversive elements as a means of psychic survival. He writes:

> What must be remembered is that people live in terms of images which represent the fundamental conceptions embodied in their rituals and myths. In the absence of adequate images they live in terms of such

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[27]Saunders J. Redding, "The Problem of the Negro Writer," Massachusetts Review (1964): 57-70.

[28]Saunders J. Redding 64.

[29]Ruas 6.

> compelling images (and hence rituals and myths) as are abroad at that time.[30]

What are the specific elements and images recorded in Morrison's novels that work together to achieve this cultural power? Most evident in her works are ideas of African spirituality with its accompanying themes of ancestor communication and the urgency of community responsibility--themes that also exist in folklore. At the core of these themes is spirituality, the backbone of African culture. Given the historical experiences of African people in this country, a significant way to live in a world of change is to hold onto something that is a constant. Spirituality provides that constant. Not to be confused with religion, spirituality is an active principle that influences all aspects of daily life. Its three basic movements appear to be: 1) engaging and naming reality-or speaking from the heart; 2) being faithful to reality-or living what one knows--growing and engaging life in a truthful way; and 3) corresponding to reality--exercising one's right to be self-defined.

African American literature testifies to belief in the faithfulness of the spirit. In The African Genius, Davidson says, "Every group has needed to define itself in order to believe in itself. So as to enter a firm

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[30]Albert Murray, The Hero and The Blues (Columbia: UP of Missouri, 1973) 13.

claim upon the future, every group has had to give itself a name and a heritage.[31]

What follows is a discussion that highlights the deep structure outlined by the ontological principles that inform Morrison's work. There can be no worthwhile deliberation of the concepts of spirituality, ancestors, or community without providing this background. In his book, Muntu, Janheinz Jahn sets forth the philosophy originally presented by the Rwandan, Alexis Kagame, that provides a basis for the values and primary assumptions that underlie the cultural paradigm.

The cultural system described by Jahn is derived from the Dogon, Yoruba, and Bantu cultures. Although he consolidates these various cultural ideas, he is not positing African culture as a monolithic structure. Instead, he confirms that it is from the recognition of "the differences and diversity" that he is able to advance the notion of a common denominator, "a unity of philosophy and epistemology at the core of the African world."[32] With this in mind, the terms presented in his discussion are expressed in the African language from which they originally derived. Jahn explains,

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[31]Basil Davidson, The African Genius (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969) 49.

[32]Jahn xxiii.

"Since African culture appears as a unity, it makes no difference from which language a term is derived."[33] Cheikh Anta Diop underscores this idea of unity in the introduction to his authoritative work, The Cultural Unity of Black Africa. He writes, "I have tried to bring out the profound cultural unity still alive beneath the deceptive appearance of cultural heterogeneity.[34]

The first of these principles is *NTU*, which is the foundation of African culture and the unifying force that formulates and constitutes the totality of existence.[35] *NTU* is the force of harmony which is characterized as the order of the universe. However, the specifics of this harmony need examination. Adebayo Adesanya, a Yoruba writer, expresses this view:

> This is not simply a coherence of fact and faith,not of reason and traditional beliefs, nor of reason and contingent facts, but a coherence or compatibility among all the disciplines...Philosophy, theology, politics, social theory,land law, medicine, psychology, birth, and burial all find themselves logically concatenated in a system so tight that to subtract one item from the whole is to paralyse the structure of the whole.[36]

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[33]Jahn 27.

[34]Cheikh Anta Diop, The Cultural Unity of Black Africa (Chicago: Third World P, 1978) 7.

[35]Jahn 121.

[36]Adebayo Adesanya, "Yoruba Metaphysical Thinking," Odu 5, (Ibadan, 1958) qtd. in Jahn 96-97.

What Adesanya is describing is a system where unity exists across the disciplines--where there is no separation, because "faith and reason are mutually dependent."[37] This harmonizing force of *NTU* is defined by four basic categories. They are:

a) *Muntu*=human being, (plural: *Bantu*);
b) *Kintu*=thing (plural: *Bintu*);
c) *Hantu*=place and time;
d) *Kuntu*=modality.[38]

These four categories are what constitute NTU, or as Jahn states, "*NTU* is what *Muntu*, *Kuntu*, *Hantu*, and *Kuntu* all equally are.[39]

The next principle that works in concert with *NTU* to activate the aforementioned categories is *NOMMO*. Jahn explains *NOMMO*. He writes, "The driving power, that gives life and efficacy to all things is *NOMMO*, the word. . ."[40] He continues the definition of *NOMMO* and emphasizes that it is "the physical-spiritual life force which awakens all sleeping forces and guides physical and spiritual life."[41] This *NOMMO* exists in the shape of the spoken word as well as in the blood, water, and seed and in everything that quickens life.

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[37]Jahn 97.

[38]Jahn 100.

[39]Jahn 101.

[40]Jahn 101.

[41]Jahn 105.

Having defined the two principles that lay the foundation for African culture it is necessary to take a brief look at how they function with the categories of *Muntu*, *Kintu*, *Hantu*, and *Kuntu*, since the bulk of my textual analysis of Morrison's novels derive from these premises. At first, it would appear that the categories need no explication, however, this is far from the case as these classifications operate within a particular African context and as such are not associated with the usual denotative meanings given them. For example, the term *Muntu* does not simply mean human being. Jahn illustrates, ". . . the concepts *Muntu* and *human beings* are not coterminous, since Muntu includes the living and the dead, orishas, loas, and Bon Dieu."[42] The dominant idea pertaining to Muntu is that there are other forces (unseen) that occupy the world with human beings and as such compose "intelligent life" in the universe. These members of *Muntu* have control over *NOMMO*.[43]

Next is *Kintu*, which consists of things such as "plants, animals, minerals, tools, objects of customary usage, and so on."[44] This category consists of those things that need the command of a Muntu as they cannot

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[42]Jahn 101-102.

[43]Jahn 102.

[44]Jahn 102.

act for themselves since the command of a Muntu activates them.[45] It is interesting to note that certain trees are exempt from this classification. Jahn notes, "In them [trees] the water of the depths, the primal Nommo, the word of the ancestors, surges up spontaneously; they are the road traveled by the dead, the loas, to living men; they are the repository of the deified."[46]

This special status given to trees in the African philosophy explains why they are given primacy as a motif in the fiction of African Americans. In some novels for instance, they are given status as minor characters. In The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, written by Ernest J. Gaines, the title character in a monologue about how the indigenous people of America worshipped the river shares her beliefs concerning trees. The title character states:

> There's an old oak tree up the quarters where Aunt Lou Bolin and them used to stay. That tree has been here, I'm sure, since this place been here, and it has seen much, and knows much much. And I'm not ashamed to say I have talked to it, and I'm not crazy either. It's not necessary craziness when you talk to trees and rivers.[47]

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[45]Jahn 102.

[46]Jahn 102.

[47]Ernest J. Gaines, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (New York: Bantam, 1971) 147-148.

In this passage the tree is personified and is shown to have the ability to "know." She also reinforces the African cultural concept of being connected to nature - the harmonic principle of *NTU*. Gaines equips the character with the ability to distinguish the *Muntu* nature attributed to certain trees. The character says:

> Anybody caught talking to a chinaball tree or a thorn tree got to be crazy. But when you talk to an oak tree that's been here all these years, and knows more than you will ever know, it's not craziness; it's just the nobility you respect.[48]

This idea of "treeness" can be seen in Toni Morrison's fourth novel, Tar Baby as well in her other novels. Jadine, the protagonist of the novel, at a crossroads in her life, has a spiritual experience in a forest that serves as an initiation of sorts. After the jeep runs out of gas, she is left alone in the woods while Son, the symbolic representation of the natural world, goes to town to get gas for the vehicle. With charcoal in hand she attempts to sketch the trees. Venturing into the forest, she drops her pad and as the omniscient narrator records, engages in a sexual dance with the tree:

> [She] grabbed the waist of a tree which shivered in her arms and swayed as though it wished to dance with her. She struggled to

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[48]Gaines 148.

> lift her feet and sank an inch into the moss-covered jelly. . . She tightened her arms around the tree and it swayed as though it wished to dance with her. . . Count. Just count. Don't sweat or you'll lose you partner, the tree. Cleave together like lovers. Press together like man and wife. Cling to your partner, hang on to him and never let him go. Creep up on him a millimeter at a time, slower than the slime and cover him like the moss. Caress his bark and finger his ridges. Sway when he sways and shiver with him too. Whisper your numbers from one to fifty into the parts that have been lifted away and left tender skin behind.[49]

This episode prefigures a relationship with Son, for whom she had previously professed a profound revulsion because of his earthiness. This ritual act with the tree also signified her struggle with getting in touch with herself, her spirit, and her ancestors. Thus the concept of tree is used in the capacity of counselor, phallic symbol, and cultural guide. These are but two of the many examples where trees are featured in African American literature. I will explore this idea further in the subsequent chapters.

The next category is Hantu which is referred to as time and place. Jahn says, "it is the force which localizes space and time."[50] Jahn says," If one wants to characterize African culture, one must not separate

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[49]Toni Morrison, Tar Baby (New York: New American Library, 1981) 182-183.

[50]Jahn 102.

place and time."[51] In Dorothy L. Pennington's essay, "Time in African Culture," she also discusses this concept of space and time. She notes, "Time for Africans does not exist in a vacuum as an entity which can be conceptually isolated. Time is conceived only as it is related to events, and it must be experienced in order to make sense or to become real."[52]

John Mbiti adds another dimension to the African idea of time. He says, " African ideas of time concern mainly the present and the past, and have little to say about the future, which in any case is expected to go on without end."[53] He reports that time is measured in major and minor rhythms. He explains the minor rhythms are concerned with the living things of the earth such as humans, animals, plants etc. The major rhythms represent concepts such as day and night, seasons, migration of animals, famines and the movement of the heavens such as phases of the moon and eclipses.[54]

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[51]Jahn 190.

[52]Dorothy L. Pennington, "Time in African Culture," African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity, eds. Molefi K. Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990) 131.

[53]Mbiti, Introduction 37.

[54]Mbiti, Introduction 37.

According to this model posited by Mbiti, time seems to be marked by the two-dimensional placement of past and present. Since there is a concept of time as universal--a world without end--there is no need to mark the future. Mbiti expresses the absence of the concept of future in his African Religions and Philosophy. He explains:

> The linear concept of time in Western thought, with an indefinite past, present, and infinite future is practically foreign to African thinking. The future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized, and cannot, therefore constitute time.[55]

Here he reinforces the notion of time being marked by an event and witnessed by someone. The philosophical question usually raised in introductory philosophy classes concerns whether or not a tree makes a sound if no one is in the forest to hear it fall. In contradistinction to the African sense of time the European concern with the sound of the falling tree in the forest is not an issue to be considered. In The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines demonstrates this idea of time being marked by an event. In this excerpt Jane is trying to remember when Timmy, one of the other characters left. She recalls, "Timmy left here when? Let me think now, let me think. 1925 or

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[55]John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 20.

'26-because he was gone before the high water, and the high water was in '27."[56] She continues with these recollections:

> When did Long come in? Long came in when? After the high water-yes. Before the high water. We didn't have school at Samson. The children went to school in the Bottom or up at Ned's school up the road. Long came in after the high water and gived us free books for the first time. And that's when they started teaching in the church here on the place. They had just built the church. They hadn't even painted it yet.[57]

Pennington sums up this look at the African concept of time. She remarks:

> Those who perceive that there is a higher force in charge will likely be less time conscious, reasoning that no matter how conscientiously humans plan their lives they are not the final determinants of those events. . . Those humans who seek to gain dominion over nature, are those who tend to regard themselves as having control over their existence, leading them to be conscious of how they mark their time.[58]

This concept of time will be a major cultural signifier to be analyzed in the following chapters. At this juncture, however, it is important to note the last of our philosophical categories, *Kuntu*. Jahn describes *Kuntu* as a modal force. He warns that this category might be difficult to understand due to its abstract

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[56]Gaines 147

[57]Gaines 147.

[58]Pennington 125.

nature. He says, "A modal force such as beauty is hard to imagine as an independently acting force."[59] Perhaps, this idea can be best understood presented in literature. In Toni Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye there is a passage in which conversation as *Kuntu* is portrayed. Morrison's omniscient narrator records:

> Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies and retires. Another sound enters and is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter-like the throb of a heart made of jelly. The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre.[60]

Another example of *Kuntu* is shown as the manifestation of anger in The Bluest Eye:

> Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame. Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality, a presence. An awareness of worth. It is lovely surging. Her thoughts fall back to Mr. Yacobowski's eyes, his phlegmy voice. The anger will not hold; the puppy is too easily surfeited. Its thirst too quickly quenched, it sleeps.[61]

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[59]Jahn 103.

[60]Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye (New York: Washington Square, 1970) 17.

[61]Morrison, Bluest 43.

Basically, *Kuntu* presents itself as a trope--a way to concretize the abstract. It reveals itself as imagery like the dance imagery in the previous excerpt or as personification in the passage above.

Another component of *Kuntu* is rhythm and the aesthetic principle. Jahn says,. . . "The African aesthetic rests, on the aesthetics of *Kuntu*, and that means, on the harmony of meaning and rhythm, of sense and form. . .[62] For Africans, the aesthetic distinction is most evident in the idea that the force is not in the object (*Kintu*), but within the exercise of art (*Kuntu*). This idea can be reduced to a revision of one cliché: the *means* justify the *end* and the substitution of another, art for art's sake. Kariamu Welsh Asante further divides this aesthetic quality of *Kuntu* into seven categories.[63] They are as follow:

1) **polyrhythm**- the motion sense
2) **polycentrism**-motion spending time
3) **curvilinear**-form, shape and structure
4) **dimensionality**-texture
5) **epic memory**-experience or memory sense
6) **holistic**-the parts are not accentuated beyond the whole
7) **repetition**-intensification

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[62]Jahn 174.

[63]Kariamu Welsh Asante, "Commonalities in African Dance: An Aesthetic Foundation," African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity eds. Molefi K. Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990) 71-83.

This frame provided by Asante adds clarity as well as dimension to the concept of *Kuntu* and will be important in providing the structure for the discussion of these specific elements in the texts of Morrison's novels.

From this description of *Kuntu*, it can be concluded that *Kuntu* works intimately with *NOMMO* providing for example, the timbre in Bessie Smith's voice, the passion in the preacher's sermonic delivery, the "soul" quality in the voices of Aretha Franklin and James Brown and the drum rhythms that evoke the orisha, loa, or ancestors. Eugene Redmond refers to this quality as being, "both technique and portraiture." He continues, "it is visual and optical. It frames, exchanges and makes a strong statement for African people to adapt to change-up."[64]

It has been my intention to establish the philosophical foundation for African culture. This is in no way a comprehensive analysis, but a way to provide a point of departure and paradigm of concepts to be discussed in subsequent chapters. The next focal point delineated in this study is Morrison's employment of African epic elements. Morrison's literary considerations are modifications of the African epic in order to accomplish the reclamation of the African

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[64]Redmond interview.

heritage: "ancestor worship, the supernatural, and African religion and folklore."[65]

Illustrations of these continuities are replete in Morrison's novels. First, there is what Okpewho considers one of the primary resources of the epic, the bard or in Morrison's case the narrator. One of the bard's most prolific skills is the "flexible technique of improvisation."[66] Most assuredly, Morrison echoes this proficiency in her use of precise language that mirrors musical improvisation. In Song of Solomon she writes:

> He knew her face better than he knew his own. Singing now, her face would be a mask; all emotion and passion would have left her features and entered her voice. But he knew what when she was neither singing nor talking her face was animated by her constantly moving lips. She chewed things. As a baby, as a very young girl, she kept things in her mouth--straw from brooms, gristle, buttons, seeds, leaves, string, and her favorite, when he could find some for her, rubber bands and India rubber erasers (emphasis added).[67]

The narrator starts with the idea of Pilate's face, then moves to her lips, then to specific movements of her lips, then on to a more focused look:

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[65]Jane Campbell, Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1986) 137.

[66]Isidore Okpewho, The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance (New York: Columbia UP, 1979) 40.

[67]Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon (New York: New American Library, 1977) 30.

> Her lips were alive with small movements. If you were close to her, you wondered if she was about to smile or if she was merely shifting a straw from the base line of her gums to her tongue. Perhaps she was dislodging a curl of rubber band from inside her cheek, or was she smiling? From a distance she appeared to be whispering to herself, when she was only nibbling or spitting tiny seeds with her front teeth.[68]

Morrison ends her excursion, this variation on a theme, with a return to the beginning in much the same manner of a jazz musician who rejoins the melody after a protracted wandering up and down the scales. The reader's attention, once again, is directed to a consideration of the mask[69]:

> Her lips were darker than her skin, wine stained, blue-berry-dyed, so her face had a cosmetic look--as though she had applied a very dark lipstick neatly and blotted away its shine on a scrap of newspaper.[70]

This idea of masking referred to by Ellison earlier in this chapter, suggests another epic element, the mask. This motif is usually employed as an ironic device and clearly the heroes of the African epics, Sundiata, and Mwindo begin their heroic adventures as masked heroes. For example, Sundiata's late physical development and the accompanying derision mask the

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[68]Morrison, Song 30.

[69]The word cosmetics denotes a kind of face covering or mask.

[70]Morrison, Song 30.

possibility of his emerging as a great conqueror whose name is destined to be eternally perpetuated. In a similar fashion, Mwindo is a baby when he undertakes his heroic journey; a baby is hardly the heroic idea of authority. In Morrison's revised epics she introduces the idea of marking as a correlate of masking and her protagonists are physically marked, a device which helps to substantiate their position as heroes.

In addition to the unique function of the epic bard and the concept of masking in the African epics, there are also distinct differences in the heroic attributes that serve to further distance them from their European counterparts. Nevertheless, African epics contain the rudiments of the basic epic formula: auspicious births; a sense of the quest; and engagement in battles--possessing these "universal" elements does not diminish the uniqueness of the African epic tradition. The African epic is distinguished by the the prominence of music. Christiane Seydou notes, "Music is an essential feature common to all epics in West Africa."[71] Okpewho recognizes that formulae, epithets, topoi, repetition, call and response,and

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[71]Christiane Seydou, "A Few Reflections on Narrative Structures of Epic Texts: A Case Example of Bambara and Fulani Epics," trans. Brunhilde Biebuyck, Research in African Literatures 14 (1983) 312.

digression define the African epic.[72] Biebuyck agrees and adds to the list: the emphasis on performance, the prevalence of occult forces and heroic manipulation of these forces; an amalgam of music and dance; the audience's interaction with the bard; and the use of a rich and highly poetic language.[73]

The types of characters found in the African heroic epics is the last quality to be explored. According to Biebuyck, the following character types are found in the Nyanga epic, Mwindo: heroes; people in special roles, such as ritual experts; divinities that live in the air, subterranean worlds, in the water, and the people associated with those deities; spirits of the dead; extraordinary beings who live in the forest, sky, and caves; animals, birds, and insects; and the fabulous; of these characters the hero is of primary importance.[74]

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[72]Okpewho, Epic In Africa (passim).

[73]In his review of Isidore Okpewho's, The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance, Kunene states, " Every human society has a clear view of what contributes the heroic, the epic the extraordinary "(552). Kunene calls for African scholars to give the parameters of this expressive behavior. Clearly the use of music, dance and the heightened emphasis of the performance make definitive statements for the cultural authenticity of the African epic. Mazisi Kunene, rev. of The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance, by Isidore Okpewho, Research in African Literatures 11 (1980): 552-557.

[74]Daniel Biebuyck, Hero and Chief: Epic Literature From the Bayanga (Zaire Republic) (Los Angeles: U of

In both epics, Sundiata and the Mwindo, the heroes share similar traits. They both are born to suffering women, their fathers are kings, and the heroic sons are destined to become rulers; these circumstances provide a source of tension. fabulous; of these characters the hero is of primary importance.[75]

In both epics, Sundiata and the Mwindo, the heroes share similar traits. They both are born to suffering women, their fathers are kings, and the heroic sons are destined to become rulers; these circumstances provide a source of tension. Another feature, according to Christiane Seydou, is that the hero is depicted as outside the norm, as excessive, and as fundamentally inimitable.[76] John W. Roberts adds:

> The African epic hero, despite his apparent moral transgressions, characteristically performs actions that African people would view as morally justifiable retaliatory actions in their all encompassing religious universe. The hero's adventures, in many ways, represent a fictionalized and much more involved example of the procedures used by medicine-men in African communities in dealing with the manifestations of evil that arise within the community and threaten its well-being.[77]

California P, 1978) 28-32.

[75]Daniel Biebuyck, Hero and Chief: Epic Literature From the Bayanga (Zaire Republic) (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1978) 28-32.

[76]Seydou 314.

[77]Roberts 130.

This hero is fearless, has supernatural dimensions, manifests a fierce pride, is eminent in bearing, physically strong, and is a deliverer of his people.[78] Moreover, he is tested and tormented, invulnerable, and has a propensity for verbal magic.[79] As a result of these traits he is able to restore cohesion to the community.

These epic factors, thought to be lost *en route* to America via the Middle Passage, are recovered through Morrison's revision of epic realities which incorporate the cornerstone of the African tradition with the enlivened annexation of "New World" and woman-centered concepts. Her reconstruction is seen in her shift from the male hero, typical in both African and European epics to the female heroine. This change also indicates a shift in focus from public to private considerations of the heroic quest. The village setting is translated into the community or neighborhoods, the supernatural forces are supplanted by their syncretic manifestations, and the battles shift from physical to psychological and are confined to the home, the domain of women.

Epic fulfillment is achieved when the heroine acknowledges her identity complete with a past and

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[78]Okpewho, Epic in Africa.

[79]Biebuyck, Hero And Chief.

unites herself with others. In this transformation of self, gained through the challenges of the journey, the veil which had separated the hero from cosmic wholeness is lifted. This resolution is accomplished in various ways in the novels of Morrison: through healing and-or transition or transformation of individual and-or community. The achievement of heroic completion of the characters during the "return" phase[80] is usually accompanied by a highly stylized ritual which re-consolidates the psychological with the social dimension of being.

The final point to be discussed in this chapter is the ancestral presence, the focal point of this dissertation. The use of the ancestral figure is a motif that appears in a number of works within the African American canon. One of the significant instances of the ancestral presence in African American literary canon occurs in Ralph Ellison's, Invisible Man. In Chapter One, Trueblood muses about his grandfather, a self-possessed character that the audience is only introduced to by way of the

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[80]In a linear-defined reality, this return phase signals the completion of the epic journey. However, when situated in the African world, it also signals a beginning as the community receives new information upon which to act. This is consistent with the importance of community survival in the African context.

Trueblood's memory. He invokes the male ancestor through reflection as follows:

> . . . They stayed in their place, worked hard, and brought up my father to do the same. But my grandfather is the one. He was an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who caused the trouble.[81]

The hero recalls the death-bed message of his grandfather which consists of advice about what is needed to achieve in this world. The grandfather's advice:

> Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with your yesses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. . . Learn it the younguns. . .[82]

The significance of the old man's words can be found in Trueblood's comment. He says that although he was warned along with the other children to forget the grandfather's words, he did not because of their "tremendous effect."[83] He says further:

> I could never be sure of what he meant. Grandfather had been a quiet old man who never made any trouble, yet on his deathbed he had called himself a traitor and a spy, and he had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity. It became a constant puzzle which lay unanswered in the back of my

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[81]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Signet, 1952) 19.

[82]Ellison, Invisible 20.

[83]Ellison, Invisible 20.

> mind. And whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out this advice *in spite of myself* (emphasis added).[84]

Here, the power of *NOMMO* represented by the grandfather's words serves as the ancestral presence that initiates the heroic quest in this lengthy tale of epic dimensions. Interesting to note is the idea of ancestral intervention that Ellison advances on behalf of his character. Trueblood recounts the relinquishing of will to the ancestor as he goes through the motions of day-to-day life. The reader does not "see" the ancestor again until the hero has gone through a series of dramatic episodes and is at the threshold of self-realization--"free of illusion." The character says:

> . . . So I denounce and I defend and hate and I love. Perhaps that makes me a little bit as human as my grandfather. Once I thought my grandfather incapable of thoughts about humanity, but I was wrong. . .he accepted his *humanity* just as he accepted the *principle*. It was *his*, and the principle *lives on* in all its human and absurd diversity (emphasis added).[85]

Trueblood having reached the end of his epic journey leaves the reader with these final words which represent the function of the ancestral presence. Addressing his community of listeners he states:

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[84]Ellison, Invisible 20.

[85]Ellison, Invisible 502.

> . . . 'He only wanted us to *listen* to him rave!' But only partially true: *Being invisible* and *without substance, a disembodied voice,* as it were, what else could you do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the *lower frequencies. I speak for you* (emphasis added)?[86]

Not only has Ellison included the rationale for the ancestral spirit, he has also provided a description of the ancestors and their manner of contact with the living. According to the Ellison's definition of the ancestor, one can draw the following conclusions from this series of propositions: The ancestor:

> 1) is not visible; 2) knows things that need to be told to the living; 3) is able to communicate with the living; 4) speaks on the lower frequencies; 5) speaks to those who listen.

This description corresponds with the one offered by Morrison in her essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." "Another way of knowing, " she suggests that characterizes African American writing, is the "presence of an ancestor."[87] She offers:

> . . .it seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor. . .There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents they are sort of *timeless* people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and

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[86]Ellison, Invisible 503.

[87]Morrison, "Rootedness" 343.

> protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom (emphasis added).[88]

Her definition endows the ancestor with qualities similar to Ellison's. It is also consistent with Mbiti's "living dead." Mbiti expands the *Muntu* classification as he divides the category of ancestors into "long dead" and "recently dead" or "living dead."[89] Those classified as being "long dead are so codified because they are "spirits of forgotten people who are no longer within the personal memory of the people."[90] The "living dead" are spirits for whom the family has a conscious memory. Mbiti says:

> The living dead are the spirits that normally matter most on the family level. They are considered to be still part of their families. They are believed to live close to their homes where they lived when they were human beings. They show interest in the surviving families, and in return their families remember them by pouring out parts of their drinks and leaving bits of food for them from time to time.[91]

These timeless beings, already accounted for in Jahn's description, are also depicted in the sacred texts of ancient Egypt and are congruous with their manifestations in other African cultures. For it is the Egyptians who formulated the concept of eternal life as

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[88]Morrison, "Rootedness" 243.

[89]Mbiti, Introduction 70.

[90]Mbiti, Introduction 76.

[91]Mbiti, Introduction 77-78.

a result of following the principles of *MAAT* which find subsequent manifestations as harmony, truth, justice, order; described by Jahn as *NTU*.

The Egyptian texts are replete with references to the ancestors. For example, in the Husia, a compilation of writings from ancient Egypt, one of the passages in the Book of Ani admonishes:

> Pour libation for your father and mother who rest in the valley of the dead. God will witness your action and accept it. Do not forget to do this even when you are away from home. For as you do for your parents, your children will do for you also.[92]

The central focus of ancestor remembrances is the idea of conscious remembrance and the acknowledgement through ritual. In the ritual of pouring libation, setting out food, calling the name, the ancestor is assured permanence--or eternal life. Mbiti suggests that as long as the departed spirit has not lost its personal name and identity it more or less leads a personal continuation of life."[93]

Morrison notes the primary importance of keeping in touch with the ancestor as the responsibility of women and not so much of men. Because women have more inter-generational contact with each other-grandmother-

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[92]The Husia, [retrans. Maulana Karenga, ed. Maulana Karenga] (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1984) 53.

[93]Mbiti, Introduction 125.

daughter-daughter, she says,. . . "it is if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost.[94] This sense of being lost or detached from the ancestors results from the absence of guidance. Jahn defines the *magara* principle as, "the force of intelligence which flows into the living man from his ancestors (or orishas) without whose help there is little he can do."[95] In addition to offering guidance, the ancestors are also "the guardians of morals. In the life of the community each person has his place and each has his right to *magara*, to well being and happiness."[96] This adherence to community morals engenders well-being.

Luisah Teish, a Yemanja priestess of the Yoruba religion adds her view on the concept of the ancestor:

> Africans believe that those who go before us make us what we are. Accordingly, ancestor-reverence holds an important place in the African belief system. Through reverence for them we recognize our origins and ensure the spiritual and physical continuity of the human race.[97]

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[94]Morrison, "Rootedness" 344.

[95]Jahn 116.

[96]Jahn 116.

[97]Luisah Teish, Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practice Rituals (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985) 68.

These concepts of ancestral remembrance, veneration, and communication are some of the elements that for some readers, outside of the cultural territory described by Morrison, musings that may seem eccentric and out of the main of rationality. Morrison, however, is quick to point out their location in contemporary African American life. In an essay titled, "The Site of Memory," she defends the cultural legitimacy of this stance. She comments:

> The work that I do frequently falls in the minds of most people, into that realm of fiction called the fantastic or mythic, or magical, or unbelievable. I'm not comfortable with these labels.[98]

Morrison sees these events as everyday happenings and "has taught the reader to rediscover, reassess, and reclaim the human values signified by folk community in Black fiction."[99] This encoding of messages to the "village" is the purpose for her writing. What is in need of rediscovery is the cultural location that characterizes her novels--where gossip is "truth," where numbers are played according to dreams, where "play names" are given in order to protect children,

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[98]Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, eds. Ferguson, et. al.,(Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990) 302.

[99]Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers, Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 129.

where illness is viewed as a "bad spirit" to be rebuked, where pain can be accompanied by laughter, and language is for conjuring.[100]

The central gist of Keith Byerman's essay titled, "Beyond Realism," is that Morrison's works are indeed located "beyond realism" in some fantasyland, or netherworld, as witnessed by the reporting of "extreme events."[101] He describes the intent of her character's quest as a "pursuit of some black folk value, such as true community, true family name, or authentic black history."[102] For Byerman, this quest is realized only after the "loosening of the control of logocentrism so as to achieve a black selfhood that negates that control."[103] In this "objective" literary statement, Byerman points out the Eurocentric

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[100]The explanation of "playing numbers" can best be defined as the African community's version of currently State controlled and sanctioned games of chance where a combination of numbers are selected and money is wagered. Before the establishment of State-operated lotteries African Americans, for the most part, placed their bets with number runners (those who placed their bets for them) based on "hunches," dates of significance, dreams, or house numbers. There are "dreambooks" that provide the corresponding three digit numbers for various types of dreams. Sometimes numbers are played based on the dreams of others which further illustrates the interrelatedness of the community.

[101]Keith E. Byerman, "Beyond Realism," Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 100.

[102]Byerman, "Beyond", 100.

[103]Byerman, "Beyond," 100.

intent of his essay, which is to move Morrison and by association African people out of the arena of logical thinking by claiming the content of her work is shaped by emotionalism.[104] The assumption in his remarks is that the inclusion of culturally specific items that do not necessarily appear as motifs in the European American literary canon are not logical, not real, and out of control.[105]

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[104]Marimba Ani suggests that rationality is the basis for European cognitive behavior based on lineality. In the model she proposes, the knower of objectified facts is able to achieve the ultimate in that culture. It follows, according to Ani, that the denial of Spiritual reality is the premise for the devaluation of African self and beliefs which leads to exploitation and enslavement. Marimba Ani, Yurugu: An African Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World P, 1994) xxix.

[105]Morrison discusses the need for critics to have a more encompassing mind. She says in an interview with LeClair, "I have yet to read criticism that understands my work or is prepared to understand it." Thomas LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat": A Conversation With Toni Morrison," Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, 376. In an interview with Nellie McKay she elaborates on her concerns saying, "Critics of my work have often left something to be desired, in my mind, because they don't always evolve out of the culture, the world, the given quality out of which I write. Other kinds of structures are imposed on my works, and therefore they are either praised or dismissed on the basis of something that I have no interest in whatever, which is writing a novel according to some structure that comes out of a different culture. . . I long for a critic who will know what I mean when I say "church," or "community," or when I say "ancestor," or "chorus." Because my books come out of those things and represent how they function in the black cosmology." Toni Morrison, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," With Nellie McKay Contemporary Literature 4 (1983): 425.

Having established an African provenance for the cultural ideas along with the imperatives that direct Morrison's artistry, in the following chapters the careful precision of her cultural aplomb will become apparent. In the remaining chapters, I will attempt to define the logic used by Sethe and Sula as they interact with an ancestral presence.

CHAPTER THREE

LIVING WITH THE DEAD: MEMORY AND THE ANCESTRAL PRESENCE IN BELOVED

I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother's tiddies. In her milk.

Gayl Jones-- Corregidora

Now women forget all those things they don't want to remember and remember everything they don't want to forget.

Zora Neale Hurston--
Their Eyes Were Watching God

I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers.

Langston Hughes--"The
Negro Speaks of Rivers"

Using the conceit of memory as the central organizing principle, Morrison introduces characters, provides the conflict, and lays the mythic foundations necessary to invoke ancestral presence in the novel, Beloved. The focus for this chapter is an examination of the heroic character, Sethe, and the ways in which the ancestor, as memory, works in consonance with archetype and ritual to engender her fulfillment.

The examination of memory is an important place to begin because only when characters regain a sense of past do they begin to imagine a future. Ironically, the novel ends with the sentence, "It was not a story

to pass on."[1] This sentence is repeated three times, framing the last five paragraphs of Beloved. In these concluding lines, the title character, Beloved is described as "disremembered and unaccounted for" as well as irretrievable and "unclaimed" because they "don't know her name."[2] The omniscient narrator's seemingly paradoxical ending of the story by mandating a mass "forgetting," is significant, since the novel's focus is "remembering." However, this forgetting constitutes memory, albeit, in a different way than remembering does. The process works in reverse, deleting items rather than storing them. In any case, memory acknowledges that some conscious decision has been made, some selection process has occurred. "They forgot her like a bad dream," "quickly and deliberately forgot her," "couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said", "Remembering seemed unwise"[3] are word masks that disguise the deliberate recollection of not only Beloved, but others as well. It is enough to say, that in the deep structure (where compelling meaning abides), the narrator has reinforced the remembrance of the story events. This reinforcement has been made

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[1]Toni Morrison, Beloved, (New York: Knopf, 1987) 274-275.

[2]Morrison, Beloved 274.

[3]Morrison, Beloved 274-275.

through the trope of repetition and the detailed listing of items to "disremember."

In "Memory, Creation, And Writing," Morrison defines memory in this manner:

> Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was--that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way.[4]

By connecting Beloved to the un-named "sixty million or more" referred to in the dedication to the novel, Morrison reinforces the reluctance of the characters to delve into memory. In Eusebio L. Rodrigues' essay, "The Telling of Beloved", he attributes this hesitancy to relate the story to the nature of the "unspeakable" and exceptional horror of the memorates. He writes, "the past, racial and personal, seared into the being of her characters, has to be exorcised by 'rememory'."[5]

In an interview, shortly after winning the Pulitzer Prize for Beloved, Morrison remarks that the enslavement of African people is something that no one wants to remember. She states:

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[4]Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing," Thought 59 (1984): 385.

[5]Eusebio L. Rodrigues, "The Telling of Beloved," Journal of Narrative Technique 21 (1991): 153-169.

> I thought this is (sic) got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean it's national amnesia.[6]

This amnesia is confirmed by Sethe who consistently fights back the painful events of the past in her "rememory." This struggle with the brain that keeps her "not interested in the future" [7] can be seen in the following passage where Sethe chides her memory for its insistence of recalling disturbing things:

> Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just one, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite? I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up.[8]

These memories form the necessary bridge that leads to the healing of the characters, the central point of the novel. Memory, a phenomenon of primary importance in an oral tradition, becomes a political and cultural statement in Beloved evidenced by Morrison's combination of folktale and remembered history.

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[6]Toni Morrison, Interview. "The Pain of Being Black," Bonnie Angelo, Time May 1989: 120.

[7]Morrison, Beloved 70.

[8]Morrison, Beloved 70.

The reformation and relocation of memory through scenarios that conjure up ancestral images are accomplished by connecting characters' recollections of past events with re-enactments of African ritual behavior, eulogistic tributes to the memory of Baby Suggs, and the recursive signification of mythic discourse.[9]

These mythic elements are features that "enable the survival and transference of memory."[10] Offering an expanded definition of mythologies Holloway notes:

> Mythologies are the reconstructions of memory--the meta-matrix for all the usages of language and the primary source of a literature that would recover a historical voice that is at once sensual, visceral, and real.[11]

These mythologies work in concert with language to tell the stories that lead Sethe toward epic completion.

The characters offer differing accounts of events, each of them providing what is significant and poignant for them and omitting details that do not

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[9]In Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature, Karla Holloway discusses the function of myth in narratives by African women. She suggests that myth is the "perfect vehicle" for methodology because of its recursive signification and because of its "articulation of an implicit cultural memory" (31). Karla Holloway, Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP) 31.

[10]Holloway 94.

[11]Holloway 107.

inform their personal mythic realities. What some characters leave out, others furnish; the results of which is the creation of a complete story. "Every one tells or sings the story of slavery."[12] Like Sethe's, these stories rooted in the past aren't easily told. Rodrigues says that all the characters "have to tear the terrible past, bit by painful bit out of their beings in order to be healed."[13] The result of their collective account is a view of captivity from a sweeping perspective in this circular narrative.

Morrison constructs the story in non-sequential order, using Baby Suggs as the central focus for the relating of major story elements from the characters and omniscient narrator. This circularity, akin to the African tradition of call and response, allows for the affirmation of the ancestral ontological experience.[14] Holloway adds texture to this idea of circularity. She says, "because she [ancestor] serves as a recursive

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[12]Barbara Rigney, The Voices of Toni Morrison (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1991) 33.

[13]Rodrigues 153.

[14]Ani xxvii-xxviii. This circularity is the antithesis of lineality which Ani describes as the interpretation of phenomena as being made up of uni-dimensional, separate entities arranged in sequential order. This conception is necessarily secular and results in desacralization. It denies circularity and the spiral of organic development. It prevents transcendence of ordinary time and space, thereby denying ancestral ontological experience.

touchstone for the simultaneous existence of and revision in the idea of mediation, the ancestral presence constitutes the posture of (re)membrance."[15] Morrison says that she prefers to "develop parts out of pieces. . .preferred them unconnected--to be related but not to touch, to circle, not line up--."[16]

The cyclical concept is also reinforced through circular language, "I am Beloved's and she is mine," [17] language rich in oxymorons, ". . . drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind,"[18] paradoxical statements, "I"ll protect her while I'm alive and I'll protect her when I ain't,"[19] and "Ella . . . listened for the holes--the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask. Listened too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind."[20]

Morrison establishes the frame for remembrance by her calculated recording of those insufferable events

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[15]Holloway 115. The ancestor who signifies rebirth is repetition or the principle of circularity.

[16]Morrison, "Memory" 388.

[17]Morrison, Beloved 214.

[18]Morrison, Beloved 41.

[19]Morrison, Beloved 45. This passage makes a subtle statement about Sethe's belief in the continuation of life after physical life. Furthermore, Sethe is aware of how the dead can communicate with and continue to influence the living.

[20]Morrison, Beloved 92.

that define both the community highlighted in the novel and those in the realm of the ancestors. These ancestors and their historical experiences of captivity and enslavement are recalled in the narrative in order to demonstrate African continuities and to make strong historical statements.

Barbara Christian notes this historical analysis to which Morrison, along with other writers such as Sherley Anne Williams (Dessa Rose) and Alice Walker (The Color Purple) subscribe. These writers have written historical novels in order to revise history from "their imaginative and informed point of view."[21] This excursion into the past is complicated and reflects a movement "beyond the dimensions of the given, beyond recording of fact, into an area that is at the edge of consciousness and experience."[22] Claus Uhlig agrees, and says that "potentiality" depends on "historical awareness."[23]

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[21]Barbara Christian, "Somebody Forgot To Tell Somebody Something: African American Women's Historical Novels," Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance, eds. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1990) 327.

[22]Rigney 61

[23]Claus Uhlig, "Forms of Time and Varieties of Change in Literary Texts," Comparative Literature 37 (1985): 298.

There is a qualitative difference between the historical record and the narrative that Morrison creates. As Holloway points out, "the idea of ancestry obviously implicates a spiritual history, one that is enabled through memory."[24] This idea of spiritual history presents a "consideration of time that exceeds its anticipated boundaries."[25] Therefore, time defined by the historicity of the spiritual emphasis, is one of the decisive elements that shape both the telling and what is told. The concept of "real" history, posited to be linear and serialized, is razed as Morrison replaces it and offers a definition of African-centered history consistent with the principle of *NTU*.

In addition to circularity, her narratives focus on embellished personal accounts of individual lives in ways that the enslavement narratives couldn't. Barbara Christian says that nineteenth century writers were "constrained by the socio-political biases of their time."[26] which restricted the expression of traditional beliefs because of the "detrimental effects that such 'superstitious,' or non-Christian concepts

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[24]Holloway 102.

[25]Holloway 102. This idea is consistent with the temporal/spatial reality of *Hantu*.

[26]Christian, "Somebody" 330.

would have had on their own people."[27] These narratives were also restrained from the illustration of overt acts of resistance, considered outside the mainstream of abolitionist approved behavior. These self-determining acts were avoided as they would "muddy the already murky waters of sentiment" toward African people by "presenting characters that might terrify their readers."[28]

In her essay,"The Site of Memory," Morrison describes some of the conventions used by these nineteenth century writers to avoid the details of some of their most harrowing experiences. She notes: "Whenever there was an unusually violent incident, or a scatological one, or something 'excessive,' one finds the writer taking refuge in the literary conventions of the day."[29] She continues, "Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, 'But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate'."[30] The effect of this type of stricture in making the condition of brutal bondage "palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate

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[27]Christian, "Somebody" 330.

[28]Christian, "Somebody" 331.

[29]Morrison, "Site" 301.

[30]Morrison, "Site" 301.

it,"[31] was that an authentic view of the African's suffering was veiled and the interior life of the captives was obfuscated and its actual existence denied. An example of the bold strokes of Morrison's story can be seen when Sethe, fearing the return of her children into bondage ends the life of her infant daughter. What follows is a description of the scene moments after Sethe murders her young daughter and injures her two sons:

> Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply tried to connect a second time. . .[32]

In Beloved, Morrison also depicts the humiliation that she considers "the key to what the experience was like."[33] The world she unveils is a place where human beings were not only marked physically, "Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right into the skin."[34] They were also psychologically scarred: "It was a place where bits were put on human mouths to prevent them from eating the food they were harvesting. "She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the

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[31]Morrison, "Site" 301.

[32]Morrison, Beloved 149.

[33]Morrison, "The Pain of Being Black" 121.

[34]Morrison, Beloved 61.

brake and the scars from the bell were thick as rope around her waist."[35] It was a place where women were raped: "She delivered but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by the `lowest yet."[36] As a putative ancestor this mother seeks to make a determination bout her posterity.

In her reconstruction of the enslavement period, Morrison employs a recursive narrative structure that takes the various personal accounts of "facts" recorded by characters and recounts a story of enslavement and its repercussions. She "gains access" to the "interior lives"[37] by altering the accounts of recorded history using a subjective approach that unveils proceedings that are too terrible to find voice.[38] There is empowerment in removing the veil and providing the interior pieces. "The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic."[39]

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[35]Morrison, Beloved 258.

[36]Morrison, Beloved 258-259.

[37]Morrison, "Site" 302.

[38]Morrison, "Site" 302.

[39]Morrison, "Site" 302.

Valerie Smith writes in Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative, that the extent of the control people have on their lives depends upon his or her capacity to tell his or her own story.[40] Morrison is clear about the empowerment in telling one's own truth. Absent from this novel is the determinism seen in some of her other novels, especially The Bluest Eye, where characters are presented with a dearth of possibilities and a limited capacity to work through their difficulties. Morrison endows the characters in Beloved with the ability to reverse the apocalyptic contours of their lives and emerge with a modicum of hope. In this reversed apocalypse, the past, not the future, is where rewards are found.[41]

This triumph may be considered attributable to the power of *NOMMO*. The characters are empowered by telling their stories which are composites of significant features of their experiences.[42] These

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[40]Valerie Smith, Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1987) 4.

[41]D.S. Russell notes, "The end is a constantly recurring theme" of apocalyptic writing. For him it is "the end that gives meaning to the present and the past and in which all things, on earth and in heaven, will receive their deserved reward." D.S. Russell, Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 21-22.

[42]This idea of validating one's own experience is

anecdotes are articulated based on the criteria that supply personal meaning to the characters as they provide insight, not only into the object, event, or person being remembered, but into themselves as well. In this manner the interior lives are shared and the story is enriched. For example, in an episode where Denver, the surviving daughter of Sethe, chronicles the things that she misses, she remembers "Baby Suggs telling her things in the keeping room. She smelled like bark in the day and leaves at night. . ."[43] Or when the narrator recalls Baby Suggs:

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the "raison de vivre" of Morrison's writing. The idea is usually effaced in literary criticism. For example, in Stanley Crouch's review of Beloved in the New Republic, he says. "Beloved above all else, is a blackface holocaust"(40) and an "appropriation of a holocaust tale" (42). This anachronistic statement affirms the necessity for Morrison to "tell" the story of the "sixty million" or more. Crouch dismisses the validity of the African's experience of captivity in the Americas in his reductive statement, "sixty is ten times six" (40). The subtext of his argument would seem Morrison has taken the Jewish story and has attempted to pass it off as the story of Africans in America in an attempt to elicit sympathy and compete in a "big-time martyrs rating" (40). Perhaps, this is the amnesia that Morrison referred to concerning the enslavement of African people; apparently Crouch has forgotten three things. First, the enslavement of African people in America lasted from 1619 at Jamestown until January 1, 1863. Second, sixty million people or more did lose their lives during the Middle Passage alone, using some very conservative figures. Third the Holocaust of the Jewish people occurred over a period of six years from 1939-1945. The estimate of sixty million is given by Toni Morrison in "The Pain of Being Black" an interview with Bonnie Angelo.

[43]Morrison, Beloved 19.

> "Suggs is my name, sir From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny."
>
> "What did he call you?"
>
> "Baby."
>
> "Well," said Mr.Garner, going pink again, "if I was you I'd stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a free Negro."
>
> "Maybe not," she thought, but Baby Suggs was all she had left of the "husband" (sic) she claimed."[44]

From the anecdotes referred to above a number of inferences about Baby Suggs can be made. For instance, from Denver's account, it can be inferred that Baby Suggs has a familiarity with traditional healing practices. This is consistent with African American folklore that reports the use of roots and herbs to cure illnesses. This idea of a "root woman" further connects her to a group of women who have maintained connections to beliefs and practices that have an African origin. This empowered status is recognized by Africans as well a European people. Barbara Christian writes in Black Feminist Criticism that, "conjure women [were] revered by both master and the slave."[45]

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[44]Morrison, Beloved 142.

[45]Barbara Christian, Black Feminist Criticism:Perspectives on Black Women Writers (New York: Pergamon, 1985) 12. The conjure woman has appeared in literature as a motif starting with the folk seculars, Charles W. Chesnutt's Aunt Peggy (The Conjure Woman and other Stories) through Toni Cade Bambara's Minnie Ransom (The Salt Eaters) and Gloria Naylor's title character

Denver's seemingly innocuous childhood memorate provides a sturdy bridge that connects Baby Suggs to a source which supplants her enslavement origins. Morrison notes the importance of locating the reality of her characters within an African cosmological frame. She states:

> If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as 'lore' or 'gossip' or 'magic' or 'sentiment.[46]

The narrator's story, moreover, shows Baby Suggs as an extraordinarily self-assured person. Through a glimpse into her interior world, the reader is allowed to form some conclusive opinions, not only about Baby Suggs, but about other Africans who have also been in similar circumstances. What we observe in Baby Suggs are thoughts that subvert the definition of her captors. Baby Suggs affirms through albeit subversion Schoolteacher's dictum that "definitions belonged to the definers--not to the defined"[47] and thus shows herself to be the definer. The prevailing conception of the time of African people as being incapable of

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Mama Day.

[46]Morrison, "Memory" 388.

[47]Morrison, Beloved 190.

self-directed thought is displaced along with claims that traditional beliefs and knowledge were lost during the Middle Passage. Bell Hooks calls these kinds of remembrances of African women both past and present a political act. She writes:

> The act of remembrance is a conscious gesture honoring their struggle, their effort to keep something for their own. I want us to respect and understand that this effort has been and continues to be a radically subversive political gesture.[48]

The individual memorates form the collective memory of political, ideological, and cultural themes particular to African peoples. These pieces of memory are delivered primarily through the narrative devices of an omniscient or implied narrator who shapes these memorates and shares them with the readers through interior monologues. Rigney contends that the "pervasive omniscience" is Morrison herself."[49] The narration also consists of direct exposition through dialogue, alternating flashbacks and flashforwards that create a sense of circularity which resembles that of the African epic. For example, in Beloved there is a non-adherence to the delineations of past, present, and

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[48]Bell Hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Politics, (Boston: South End, 1990) 43.

[49]Rigney 33.

future which is consistent with *Hantu* so that the narrator contributes to both content and structure. In epic fashion, Sethe, having upset the balance of maternal nature must restore harmony, that is, *NTU*.

The telling of Sethe's story is the primary concern of this chapter. This is therefore an appropriate place to begin the textual analysis. Sethe's story can be classified as memories at three levels of violation: physical, psychological, and spiritual. This corresponds to the structure of the novel which is divided into three major sections. Part One consists of eighteen chapters, (163 pages), Part Two has seven sections, (70 pages) and Part Three has three sections, (38 pages). These structural delineations also roughly correlate in content to ideas of past, present, and future as well as specific foci for each one of the trio of women inhabiting the house.[50]

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[50]The house, 124 Bluestone Road, is also part of the triadic structure. The number of the house indicates the displacement of order consistent with the displacement of family, displacement from Africa, and the displaced psyche associated with captivity. The missing number three however, is not actual omission since the mind insists upon making closure and inserting it anyway. This symbolizes the adjustment that African people have had to make as part of their survival in America. They have continually supplied the missing pieces in order to remain whole. The number four indicates that wholeness as it is the number of cosmic completion or wholeness. In addition, according to Schwaller de Lubicz in Esoterism and Symbol "All creation, is situated between the numbers One and Two. Then the threefold idea forms an accessible

This multi-voiced intergenerational story begins *in medias res*.[51] The first paragraph of section one, Part One, informs the reader that Baby Suggs is dead, that the boys have run away, and that Sethe and Denver are the only two left in a spiteful house possessed by a mischievous baby spirit.[52] In this synopsis of some of the salient plot elements, there is one major omission--that Sethe has committed infanticide. As the novel progresses in a series of recollections, the reader is allowed to relive at length some of the events underlying details given in the opening passage. Sethe is a victim of a victim. Her mother's victimization by a **Muntu**[53] is bequeathed to Sethe who

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Unity which can be divided and added. The Chinese sages said: One Always equals three. The Egyptian sages placed the triad at the origin of each line, as they placed the triangle at the origin of geometric forms" (26).

[51]In, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Morrison explains why she opened the novel in medias res. She says, "I wanted the compelling confusion of being there as they (the characters) are; suddenly, without comfort or succor from the 'author' with only imagination, intelligence, and necessity available for the journey" (33). The audience is invited to participate with the heroes on their journey and vicariously becomes a hero. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Michigan Quarterly Review 28:1 (1989): 33.

[52]Morrison, Beloved 4.

[53]In this case, I am referring to a particular *Muntu* that Ani calls Yurugu. Ani defines this *muntu*, Yurugu, as a being in Dogon mythology which is responsible for disorder in the universe. This is a being conceived in denial of the natural order, which then acts to initiate

consequently passes this victimization on to the daughter she murdered rather than see returned into captivity, and to Denver in varying degrees. A clear cycle of victimization has been set by the end of Part One. It becomes clear that the goal of the heroic quest is to terminate this cycle and circle of pain through self-empowerment.

In Part One, Sethe's spiritual strength and courage is demonstrated. In this regard, the stage is set for her distinction as the central character of the narrative. An example of her spiritual strength is demonstrated in the following passage:

> "And when the baby's spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye, so hard into he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue, still her mother had not looked away. She had taken a hammer, knocked the dog unconscious, wiped away the blood and saliva, pushed his eye back in his head and set his bones."[54]

Still another scenario displaying Sethe's spiritual courage and resolve occurs is to be seen when, asked by Paul D to consider moving to a happier place, she replies,

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and promote disharmony in the universe. In African cosmology such a being is deficient in spiritual sensibility, is perpetually in conflict, is limited cognitively, and is threatening to the well being of humanity (Ani xxviii).

[54]Morrison, Beloved 12.

> I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running--from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth."[55]

In the epic sense, bold affirmations of this nature usually, prefigure a test to determine the character's dauntlessness and tenacity. This passage signifies Sethe's demonstration of personal commitment and sacrifice: shows her willingness to face whatever is ahead of her in contrast to her unwillingness to examine the past.

But as she nevertheless begins to travel through memory time, the first defilement that Sethe records relates directly to her femaleness. She recalls her physical violation when the white boys on the plantation had stolen her milk. Using the trope of repetition, Morrison underscores its significance. "I had milk". . . "All I knew was that I had to get my milk to my baby girl". . . Nobody knew but me and nobody had her milk but me. . ."those boys came and took my milk". . . "held me down and took it". . . When Paul D. tries to get the facts from Sethe through questioning, "They used to cowhide you?" Sethe replies, "And they took my milk." Paul clarifies, "They beat you and you was pregnant?" To which Sethe responds, "And

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[55]Morrison, Beloved 15.

they took my milk!"[56] This "chanting" of the word milk functions metaphysically as a mantra that stills her mind and temporarily helps her transcend the horror of this memory. Moreover, the remembrance of the past acts as a sacrifice activating the talisman of healing. The pain is the *àse*[57] or *NOMMO* that inspires the peeling off of the layers of the past that keep Sethe from reaching her potential.

The story of the taking of the milk reveals the first layer of Sethe's problems. She has been violated as a female. In John Ayto's Dictionary of Word Origins he cites the etymology for the word female as the Latin, *femella* which derives from the Latin *felare* which means to suck. Etymologically it signifies a person from whom milk is sucked.[58] Once this first mental covering has been removed, Sethe as omniscient narrator releases and wonders:

> Would there be a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness, to push busyness into the corners of the room and just stand there a minute or two. . . and feel the hurt her back ought to. . . Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men

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[56]Morrison, Beloved 16-17.

[57]Judith Gleason, Oya: In Praise of an African Goddess (New York: Harper-Collins, 1987) 303.

[58]John Ayto, Dictionary of Word Origins (New York: Arcade, 1990) 224.

was there to catch her if she sank" (emphasis added).[59]

Middleton and Edwards note, "The awareness of having and using a memory, and the awareness of its properties, may well arise as a matter of difficulty--as a matter of *not* being able to remember something, or being suddenly reminded. . ."[60]

This encroachment into memory provokes the ghost whose presence is made known to Paul D through its violent demonstration in the house. Armed with the power of *NOMMO,* Paul D ritually exorcises the spirit from the house. He commands, " God damn it! Hush up!. . . Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!. . . You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!". . . It was gone."[61] Both attached and held hostage to the past, Sethe only contemplated what the future could possibly be with the arrival of Paul D. She thought, "Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and *count on something*?"[62] To Sethe, the future was keeping the

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[59]Morrison, Beloved 18.

[60]David Middleton and Derek Edwards, "Conversational Remembering: A Social Psychological Approach," in Collective Remembering, eds. David Middleton and Derek Edwards (London: Sage, 1990) 28.

[61]Morrison, Beloved 18-19.

[62]Morrison, Beloved 38.

past at bay."[63] Thinking about the meaning of the word, plans, brought Sethe back to the remembrance of the only set of plans she had ever made--"getting away from Sweet Home", which gave her the resolve to never dare life by making more."[64]

Another of the physical violations endured by Sethe is revealed when she recounts giving birth to Denver in the woods. The violation occurs because of the arduous conditions under which she had to "deliver" the baby. That she had to go through labor and delivery under the harsh conditions of a runaway at a time of great physical and emotional stress was a phenomenon peculiar to her as an African American woman and her condition of bondage. Through her reflection on this incident, Sethe is put in touch with some vital information from the distant past.

When Sethe refers to her baby in utero as an antelope she calls forth images from a remote time. Every time Sethe would stop, because of the difficulty of running while experiencing labor contractions, "the little antelope rammed her with horns and pawed the ground of her womb with impatient hooves."[65] The image of the antelope had surfaced from the deep

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[63]Morrison, Beloved 42.

[64]Morrison, Beloved 39.

[65]Morrison, Beloved 30.

recesses of a memory long restrained by the twin sensations of pain and fear. Not remembering even where she was born "Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?," she does, however, remember song and dance. This one recollection jumpstarts her stalled memory and connects her to a remembrance of a mother signified by a "cloth hat" in distinction to her "other mothers" all of whom "were also called Ma'am."[66]

The power of the song and dance memorates dominates her mind and after a brief digression to another resurrected thought, Sethe and the narrator jointly recall the liberating effect of the song and dance:

> Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma'ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew

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[66]Morrison, Beloved 30. Eugene Genovese reports, "Every plantation had one or more old women to look after the children, to cook for them, and to keep them out of mischief" (507). Out of respect, these "other mothers" were referred to as "ma'am," tradition that still exists today in the South. It is interesting to note that Sethe called her own mother "ma'am." This is probably because of the limited time that she spent with her and the distanced emotional stance taken by her mother to avoid getting too attached to her daughter. This reference to all the women on the plantation as Ma'am is not monocausal, it is also an Africanism which may have been influenced by such feelings as Genovese describes in the Americas. Eugene D. Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll: The World The Slaves Made (New York: Vintage, 1974) 507.

> her pulse better than she did. Just like this one in her stomach.[67]

What is significant in this passage is the idea that the narrator sees Sethe as one of the dancers, and this further reinforces the continuity between the multi-tiered-past and present symbolized by the image of the antelope.

Among the Bambara people of Mali this antelope, called Tji-wara, or Chi-wara (working animal), is said to have introduced agriculture to them. Its image is used in ritualistic dances to insure germination of the seed, and a good harvest. Chiwara is also the name for the goddess of fertility as well as of an earth goddess.[68] Sethe's exercise of memory forces her to listen to her own voice and to remember her own mother,

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[67]Morrison, Beloved 30.

[68]*Tji* means work and *wara* means animal, thus "working animal." These masks were worn by members of the Flanton society, a traditional adult society of which there are many correlates in West Africa. Such as the Porro (for men) society and the Sande (for women) society of Liberia. The dancers appeared in pairs, a man and a woman, an association with fertility, and spiritually prepared the ground for planting. The dancers wearing the masks, aided by song and drum "become" the spirit symbolized by the antelope as they dance. The prime purpose for the masks is to serve as a temporary dwelling place for a god. The spirit takes possession of both masks and *muntu*. Functioning at its highest level, the mask expresses the myths of a society or is even an element of those myths. "Masks," Dictionary of Black African Civilization, 1974 ed. also Ladislas Segy, African Sculpture Speaks, 4th ed. (New York: De Capo Press, 1969) 148.

her ma'am, with the special mark on her body, along with her mother's native language, songs and dances.

Another injurious memorate deals with Sethe's physical and psychological separation from her mother at an early age. This part of memory is evoked when Beloved asks Sethe if her (Sethe's) mother ever fixed her hair. She says:

> I don't remember. I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working in the indigo. . . She must have nursed me two or three weeks--that's the way the others did. Then she went back in the rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was. So to answer you, no. I reckon not. She never fixed my hair nor nothing. She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember.[69]

What Sethe refers to in the passage above are basic caretaking activities that a person under normal conditions might take for granted,[70] but because of

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[69]Morrison, Beloved 60-61.

[70]The idea of whether or not Sethe's mother combed her hair or not is not a superficial consideration as hair grooming is an endeavor of ritual proportions. As such, a body of lore has grown up around the grooming ritual, such as who should be allowed or prohibited to touch one's head and the proper disposal of hair by burning in order to prevent witches from using these exuria in external magic or in the popular parlance "fixing hexes", mojos, etc. One of the many examples of this notion is illustrated in Gloria Naylor's novel, Mama Day. Cocoa, the protagonist of the novel, returns to the Gullah Islands after having been on the mainland for many years and suffers tremendous pain for her lack of recall of the cultural mores. Although she holds her palm up to gather the loose strands of hair, and remembers that the hair has to be burned when she was finished to prevent

the nature of familial estrangement fostered by captivity, Sethe has been denied some basic nurturing.

One of Sethe's clearest personal memories of her mother occurs when her mother tutors her how to recognize her (mother) from the other ma'ams:

> Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.'[71]

The instruction cited in this passage is far removed from the guidance usually given to young girls by their mothers[72], but is consistent with the nature of the

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the birds from taking her hair and building a nest with it (246), she violates the cultural dicta by allowing someone who means her no good to comb her hair. After Cocoa leaves, Ruby "caps her jars and presses the lid on tight. She then brushes a few strands from her lap into her hand and puts them in her pocket"(247). Shortly afterwards, Cocoa becomes deathly ill from the sorcery Ruby has worked into her "head." In the Yoruba religion one's head--*ori*--must always be protected because of its significance as a spiritual point of the body. In order to counteract malicious injury, sacrifices must be offered to propitiate the spirit of negativity that would cause someone to do this.

[71]Morrison, Beloved 61.

[72]Sethe laments about this lack of guidance in womanly things. She says, "I wish I'd a known more, but, like I say, there wasn't nobody to talk to. Woman, I mean. So I tried to recollect what I'd seen back where I was before Sweet Home. How the women did there. Oh they knew all about it. How to make that thing you use to hang the babies in the trees--so you could see them

survival skills needed to endure such harsh conditions meted out by enslavement practices. Unaware of the significance of the mark, Sethe asks her mother for the mark too and receives a slap which she never understood she says: "not till I had a mark of my own."[73] When Sethe is forced to remember her mother's hanging, memory jolts her and awakens a dormant part of her "rememory" that she would have rather left closed. The narrator stresses:

> "She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten that she knew. . . Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross.[74]

The telling of this story also unites Sethe with transplanted African ancestors who "used different words."[75] This explained to Sethe why she had forgotten almost everything except singing and dancing. Paradoxically, even though she has "forgotten" nearly everything, through the remembrance of Nan, her "other mother," she was able to translate the code that was in

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out of harm's way while you worked in the fields. Was a leaf thing they gave em to chew on. Mint, I believe, or sassafras. Comfrey, maybe. . ."(160). Morrison, Beloved 160.

[73]Morrison, Beloved 61.

[74]Morrison, Beloved 61.

[75]Morrison, Beloved 62.

the "same language that her mother spoke and which would never come back."[76] Somehow, Sethe transcends the present and journeys to a place where she "was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood."[77] When she reaches her destination she recalls what Nan told her about her mother, a shipmate of Nan's on the passage from Africa:

> She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island.. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe.[78]

This recollection brings to the fore much of what had been haunting Sethe's unconscious: that her mother had in some way abandoned her. After this "rememory" session she yearns for Baby Suggs. "A mighty wish for Baby Suggs broke over her like surf.. In the quiet following its splash. . ."[79] The metaphor of remembrance as water, extended to Baby Suggs ritually invokes the ancestral presence. Jacky Martin states that the mark of Sethe's mother signifies the reduction of a human being and "launches the book's major

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[76]Morrison, Beloved 62.

[77]Morrison, Beloved 62.

[78]Morrison, Beloved 62.

[79]Morrison, Beloved 62.

symbolism and introduces its ritualistic dimension."[80] The ritual that Sethe performed was the petitioning of her mother-in-law--the closest resemblance to the idea of mother that Sethe can comfortably remember.

After Sethe arrived at 124 Bluestone Road "all mashed up and slit open,"[81] it is Baby Suggs who provides her both physical and spiritual nurturing. "Baby Suggs kissed her on the mouth," "bathed her in sections," "cleaned between Sethe's legs," "tied her stomach and vagina with sheets, "lowered her [Sethe's] feet into a bucket of saltwater and juniper[82]," and softened the crust from her nipples so she could nurse both babies.[83]

As Sethe was the substitute for Baby Suggs on the Garner's Sweet Home plantation, Baby Suggs is the substitute for the mother who was hanged. In another

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[80]Jacky Martin, "From Division To Sacrificial Reconciliation in Toni Morrison's Novels," Obsidian II 5 (1990): 89.

[81]Morrison, Beloved 135.

[82]Baby Suggs is knowledgeable of traditional practices. As a women who "knows things" she could have very well have functioned as a mid-wife. In herbal medicine both salt water and juniper are used to remove toxins from the skin tissue. The properties of juniper are beneficial for reducing swelling because they tighten tissue as well as draw out fluids and inhibits infections. Morrison's endowing Baby Suggs with this type of knowledge is a way of validating the skills and information possessed by the Africans in the domain of folk wisdom.

[83]Morrison, Beloved 92-93.

passage, Sethe calls for the presence of Baby Suggs and the power of her words, "lay it all down" which had gotten her through Buglar and Howard's disappearance and the baby ghost's presence. Sethe now summons Baby Suggs to reappear and help her through the latest assault to her mind, Halle's "face between the butter press and the churn "crowding her eyes and making her head hurt."[84] The narrator recounts:

> She wished for Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying, 'Lay em down Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield'. And under the pressing fingers and the quiet instructive voice, she would. Her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall, and hurt, she placed one by one on a bank where clear water rushed on below.[85]

This memory of Baby Suggs, ushered in with the recurring image of water, is significant because water is an archetype commonly associated with cleansing, healing, and regeneration. The river to which Sethe alludes is also a major metaphor in African and African American culture that provides a symbolic paradigm for ritual. African American spirituals and poetry are replete with references to rivers as points of transitions, locations of memory, and places of

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[84]Morrison, Beloved 86.

[85]Morrison, Beloved 86.

spiritual initiations. Gleason writes in Oya: In Praise of An African Goddess, "The river is matrix of memory."[86] This statement's profundity pertains to its analogous relationship to the novel's dominant motifs: memory, motherhood, and the ancestor. Etymologically, matrix or womb is derived from the Latin, *mater*, which means mother and progenitress.[87]

Throughout the novel this archetype is duplicated and is partially explained by de Lubicz who stresses, "There is a water principle in everything"[88] and by Morrison's use of African archetypes. Resembling the circularity that she employs in narration, diction, and plot, the symbols: dancing, river and water, and the number nine are so intricately related, that it is difficult to comment on one without examining the other. For example, when Sethe calls for Baby Suggs in the passage cited above. She goes on to say, "Nine years without the fingers or the voice of Baby Suggs was too much."[89] Deciding that she is in need of

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[86]Gleason 55.

[87]Ayto 332.

[88]R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, Esoterism and Symbol, trans. André and Goldian Vandenbroeck, (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1985) 9.

[89]Morrison, Beloved 86.

"some fixing ceremony, Sethe goes to the Clearing where Baby Suggs had danced in sunlight."[90]

This excursion into the remembrance of ritual dance is important because of its embodiment of a remembered Africanism and the connection to the ancestor,the central motivation for the narrative. Stuckey emphasizes the importance of these circles:

> In these areas, an integral part of religion and culture was movement in a ring during ceremonies honoring the ancestors. There is in fact, substantial evidence for the importance of the ancestral function of the circle in West Africa, but the circle ritual imported by Africans from the Congo region was so powerful in its elaboration of a religious vision that it contributed disproportionately to the centrality of the circle in slavery. The circle is linked to the most important of all African ceremonies, the burial ceremony.[91]

Stuckey further explains:

> The ring in which Africans danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America.[92]

Dance and river suggest each other because as Gleason says, "The river remembers transmitting sacred information through its dances."[93] Since they are a

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[90]Morrison, Beloved 86.

[91]Sterling Stuckey, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 11.

[92]Stuckey 12.

[93]Gleason 56.

part of each other they can not be separated. In much the same way, the number nine also signifies on the trope of memory and river. In the Yoruba religion the number nine is associated with Oya, the Orisha of the Joliba (Niger) river who is also identified with the ancestral cult of the Yoruba called the *egungun*. This secret society, is historically consecrated to the task of bringing the ancestor back to life in masquerade form."[94] Oya is the female warrior, owner of the ancestral cult, and a river Orisha. Her name means "she tore" a verb form that signifies an event with "disastrous consequences."[95] The myth that explains the event says, "A big tree was uprooted, literally and figuratively: the head of the household the one in whose shade we felt secure, suddenly perished. She tore, and a river overflowed its banks. Whole cloth was ripped into shreds. Barriers were broken down.[96]

The major elements in Oya's myth are analogous to those related to Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs, once the head of the household and the spiritual leader of the community, decided that "because slave life had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and

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[94]Gleason 70. One of the praises chanted for Oya is *Se Oya l'ó ni Eégun*--Oya, owner of the *Egungun* (Gleason 8).

[95]Gleason 5.

[96]Gleason 5.

tongue,' she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart."[97] This "unchurched preacher" led "every black man, woman and child" to the "Clearing--a wide - open place cut deep in the woods" (emphasis added).[98] Baby Suggs is the "big tree". "In the heat of every Saturday afternoon she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees," "Then she shouted, 'Let the children come!" "and they ran from the trees toward her," "the woods rang,"(emphasis added).[99]
It was her message of love, of dance and song that Sethe yearned for, even just to "listen for the spaces that the long ago singing had left behind."[100]

In addition to being the "big tree," Baby Suggs was also the river because what was left of her was remembrance. She also represents the barriers that were removed or broken, as she led the people to deliverance in the wilderness. This place, defined not by Christian sentiments, but by African rituals, was informed by *Kuntu* and made divine by the invocation of *NOMMO*. Berry and Blassingame affirm the importance of self-empowering gatherings like the ones conducted by Baby Suggs. These assemblies were usually acts of

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[97]Morrison, Beloved 87.

[98]Morrison, Beloved 87.

[99]Morrison, Beloved 87.

[100]Morrison, Beloved 89.

resistance because "during their captivity it was forbidden for large crowds of Africans to congregate except when whites were present."[101] Through her supplications in the Clearing the members of the community were able to break down the barriers that kept them from loving. Baby Suggs besought them to love every part of their bodies especially their hearts. "Love it. Love it hard. . . *You* got to love it, *you*."[102] Her thesis of love negated or *cleared* the oppressor's acts of hate (the antithesis). In this manner, Baby Suggs is consistent with those protagonists who Terry Otten says in order to survive "must somehow violate the rule of the oppressive system, reject the values it venerates, and recover the human potential denied to blacks."[103]

Baby Suggs' gatherings were acts of subversion and self-definition. These meetings as acts of resistance helped restore her "village's" psyche much as a queen mother would in a traditional African setting.[104]

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[101]Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame, Long Memory: The Black Experience in America (New York: Oxford UP, 1982) 9.

[102]Morrison, Beloved 88.

[103]Terry Otten, The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison (Columbia, Missouri: U of Missouri P, 1989) 3.

[104]This is not to cultural reduce African culture to a monolithic status. For the purpose of this discussion I am referring to those women in hierarchical kingdoms

Baby Suggs, according to Morrison, was born in Africa. "Baby Suggs came here out of one of those ships".[105] Therefore as African-born her resistance to enslavement and ideas of revolt might be greater than in the case of the American-born Africans as suggested by Berry and Blassingame.[106] According to them, this resistance was "usually found in their proverbs, songs, folktales, and religious beliefs."[107]

In some ways, Baby Suggs, the central ancestral presence in this novel, resembles the ancestral figure most common in the work of contemporary Black women writers, namely, "an outraged mother."[108] According to Braxton this "outraged mother" is a primary archetype who "passes on her feminine wisdom for the good of the `tribe' and the survival of all black people, especially those in the diaspora created by the Atlantic slave trade."[109] Characterized as "benevolent, instructive, and protective," this

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that have those roles such as griots and griottes.

[105]Walter Clemons, "A Gravestone of Memories," Newsweek 28 Sept. 1987: 75.

[106]Berry and Blassingame 10.

[107]Berry and Blassingame 10-11.

[108]Joanne M. Braxton, "Ancestral Presence: The Outraged Mother Figure In Contemporary Afra-American Writing," Braxton and Mclaughlin 300.

[109]Braxton 300.

ancestor employs "spiritual strength" together with "values of sacrifice, nurturance and personal courage."[110] She "fuels her heroic ones" through her "outrage at the abuse of her people and her person."[111]

Holloway does not see the ancestral presence to be as monolithic as Braxton does. She suggests that the ancestor is defined as a function of a given writer's style.[112] She notes:

> Sometimes the presence is meditative and instructive, sometimes it is meditative and condemnatory, sometimes it is meditative and silent.[113]

Baby Suggs in the course of evoked memories seems to be a composite of all three. She was meditative and instructive when she first went to the Clearing:

> After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock,Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, 'Let the children come'.[114]

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[110]Braxton 300.

[111] Braxton 301.

[112]Holloway 115.

[113]Holloway 115.

[114]Morrison, Beloved 87.

An example of her being meditative and condemnatory can be seen in her lamentation in the Clearing about the nature of the oppressor:

> And no, they ain't in love with you mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out if it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth.[115]

The last model of ancestor presence, according to Holloway's model, finds its correlation in Baby Suggs' actions after Sethe commits murder. Baby Suggs becomes meditative and silent because she can not deal with the "nastiness of life." The fact that "nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children,"[116] or that "they came in her yard."[117] Her "authority in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call" was given up when she went to bed "to think about the color of things."[118] Stamp recalls trying to dissuade her, "'Listen here, girl,' he told her, 'you can't quit the Word, I don't care what all happen to you." Baby Suggs replies,

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[115]Morrison, Beloved 88.

[116]Morrison, Beloved 30.

[117]Morrison, Beloved 179.

[118]Morrison, Beloved 177.

"That's one other thing took away from me."[119] Her detachment from the Word is symbolic of the denial of *NOMMO* which is necessary to sustain life. She dies **nine** years after the murder of Sethe's baby leaving behind a legacy of remembered words as touchstones for the characters to measure morality, comfort, and contradiction.

Sethe's psychological duress was heightened by the death of Baby Suggs and finds a temporary respite some **nine** years later with the appearance of a woman called Beloved. The first procedure in the examination of the complex nature of the title character must focus on her identity. This is not, however, a modest undertaking as she represents different things to different people in her multi-voiced, multiple identified presence.

For Sethe, Beloved is the murdered daughter returned from the grave. "BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing."[120] Horvitz claims, "She is Sethe's mother, She is Sethe herself; she is her daughter."[121] Explaining these "blurred boundaries," she says, "Beloved exists in both the

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[119]Morrison, Beloved 178.

[120]Morrison, Beloved 200.

[121]Deborah Horvitz, "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in Beloved," Studies in American Fiction 17.2 (1989):163.

realm of the particular and the universal. She is a member of Sethe's family and a representative spirit "of all the women dragged onto slave ships in Africa" and of those African women in America trying to "trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them."[122] Horvitz elucidates that Beloved as Sethe's two-year-old daughter as well as her African mother teaches Sethe that "memories and stories about her matrilineal ancestry are life-giving."[123] Richards further explains:

> The continued spiritual existence of the physically deceased also manifests itself materially. The spirits of the ancestors take physical form in the new babies that are born to the community. Babies are therefore not "new," but represent the timeless regeneration of the human. The elders of the community do not 'die,' but upon physical death are reborn into the spiritual realm as ancestors.[124]

Beloved's multiple identity is consistent with African philosophy which allows for the idea of inter-generational renewal.

Another clue to her identity as the murdered baby occurs when Sethe first sees Beloved. She was sitting

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[122]Horvitz 157.

[123]Horvitz 158.

[124]Donna Marimba Richards, Let The Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1989) 8.

down on a "stump not far from the steps of 124."[125] "The rays of the sun struck her full in the face."[126] Mintz and Price describe the significance of this scenario as they describe the journey of spirit after death:

> The spirit travels west in the direction of the setting sun. There lies the River of Death, which it must cross before reaching its final destination. Once in the Land of the Dead, the newly arrived soul is subjected to a number of ordeals whose duration is determined by the gravity of his past misdeeds. First, the person must sit on the top of a tree under the burning sun.[127]

The description given by Mintz and Price of the spirit's journey resembles Beloved's voyage and arrival to 124. Upon seeing Beloved, Sethe has an urge to relieve herself, "for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity . . . the water she voided was endless" (emphasis added.[128] This endless water represents both the rupturing and mending of birth waters and is

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[125]Morrison, Beloved 50.

[126]Morrison, Beloved 51.

[127]Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976) 145.

[128]Morrison, Beloved 51.

also metaphorical for the river (memory) of life and death.

Also significant in the formulation of Beloved's identity is the fourth section of part two where the omniscient or implied narrator's presence is effaced. The section begins with I AM BELOVED and she is mine. Although this is the only sentence punctuated in the section, the spaces are left where the punctuation would have appeared.[129] Also, the capitalization of the first three words suggests authority and deliverance. In the biblical Book of Exodus when Moses asked God by what authority should he tell the Israelites that their freedom was at hand, God responded, "I AM THAT I AM. Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me to you" (Exod. 3.13-14). The word "AM" indicates a state of existence that takes into account a combined past, present, and future (eternity) consistent with *Hantu*. It also marks a turning point in the novel positing Beloved's multi-faceted identity and prefiguring Sethe's deliverance, fragmentation, and reintegration.

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[129]This focus on the interstices is significant on two levels. First, it suggests a remembrance of unseen things by providing a place for them anyway. Moreover, it suggests a definition of time consistent with Hantu. Morrison is willing to suspend mechanical conventions and give way to cyclical temporal/spatial realities that do not separate aspects of time.

The other person to whom Beloved is significant is Denver. Denver, because of her brother's departure and the rupture between her household and the community, has had an isolated childhood. Denver sees Beloved first as the friend she never had then as her sister. "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk."[130]

In this section of the novel, Sethe and Denver, members of this family of women, have made the crucial connection to Beloved and her multi-tiered identity. And as Horvitz says, "the gap is bridged between America and Africa, the past and the present, the dead and the living, the flesh and the spirit."[131]

Another important confirmation of identity is effected by Paul D To him, Beloved was a menacing presence that consumed Sethe's attention and asserted her will on everyone. From the very beginning, her presence indicated something foreboding for Paul D. "Beloved was shining and Paul D didn't like it. . . " "That's how Beloved looked--gilded and shining."[132] Her ominous presence felt only by him provides a clue to her spiritual identity.

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[130]Morrison, Beloved 205.

[131]Morrison, Beloved 164.

[132]Morrison, Beloved 64.

At the spiritual level, Beloved, like Baby Suggs represents the Orisha, Oya.[133] Morrison did the bulk of the research for Beloved in Brazil. She says that because they kept everything she was able to get the kind of needed information that could not be found in America.[134] This statement, made primarily in reference to the archival displays of mouth bits, brakes and other metal work used by the captors to humiliate and "break" the captives preserved in the museums of Brazil obfuscates or underplays the research Morrison done in Brazil on the Orisha. In the syncretized Yoruba religion of Brazil, Candomblé, Oya is an Orisha of primary importance. The results of this research are most notable in Morrison's depiction

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[133]Oya is a reminder of the past in her capacity as the orisha of the ancestral cult. This Yoruba archetype is represented by other names in various mythologies. To the Hebrews, she is Lilith described as a shameful child killer, a long haired ghost,a goddess to be worshipped, and a concubine/seductress to be scorned. In Manfred Lurker's, The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt, the spirit represented by Oya finds its correlate in the goddesses of the moon: Uatchet and Nekhbet. Nekhbet symbolized upper Egypt and the moon's southern node while Uatchet (Wadjet) represented lower Egypt and the northern node of the moon. Lurker says that as the two protective goddesses they appeared as the mythical mothers of the king to whom they offered their breasts. Nekhbet was worshipped as a goddess of childbirth and Uatchet was assimilated with Auset, a mother goddess. This in no way exhausts the parallels of Oya from different mythologies, but is meant as a means of placing her as a recurring archetype.

[134]Walter Clemons, "A Gravestone of Memories," Newsweek 28 Sept. 1987: 75.

of characteristics and images associated with the character Beloved.

In Beloved, there is a plethora of symbols that link Beloved to this Orisha. As an illustration, Beloved is the personification of Oya or Yansan, the other name by which she is known, which means mother of nine. This number consistently recurs in the novel. The feast that prefigures the killing of the baby fed ninety [135] people, Part One of the novel where Beloved is introduced is divided into eighteen sections (nine times two). Beloved appears eighteen years after the baby's death and nine years after Baby Sugg's death.

Another example is lightning, an attribute symbolically associated with Oya whose Catholic syncrete is Candelaria, Our Lady of Candlemas[136]. When Paul D first arrives at 124, Sethe tells him, "We have a ghost in here."[137] In response to her statement, Paul D "looked quickly up the lightning white stairs behind her."[138] Also, this lightning

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[135]Numerically, both ninety and eighteen can be reduced to the composite number nine.

[136]Gleason 61. Also, in the Mwindo epic, lightning is one of the most important deities consistent with its position of importance in the cosmology of the Nyanga. "Lightening is at the center of an important cult; shrines women, red roosters, and neckrings are dedicated to him" (Biebuyck 64).

[137]Morrison, Beloved 13.

[138]Morrison, Beloved 13.

that Oya kept for herself is represented upon her altars by a small pair of swords, machetes, or sabers.[139] The implied narrator in the novel says, "In lamplight, and over the flames of the cooking stove, their [Sethe's and Beloved's] two shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords."[140]

Still another of Oya's powerful associations is with wind. She is described as the wind that proceeds a storm, the wind made by sweeping (the broom is another of her symbols), and the wind energy manifested in the lungs. When Beloved first arrived at 124 her breathing was labored. "She was breathing like a steam engine."[141]

One of Oya's praise names describes her as determined--someone who "when she's got her eye on something she never changes her intention."[142] This is clear in the attention Beloved paid to Sethe: walking her to and from work and always studying her [Sethe's] face and asking her questions.

After being at 124 for five weeks, Paul D decides that it is time to get to the bottom of this mystery called Beloved. He queries her about what she wanted,

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[139]Gleason 62.

[140]Morrison, Beloved 57.

[141]Morrison, Beloved 53.

[142]Gleason 8.

"What was you looking for when you came here," "Ain't you got no brothers or sisters," "How 'd you come? Who brought you."[143] Gleason reminds us, "Oya has no home, no special road she guards the road into the world, and guards the road to heaven."[144]

> As a goddess of transition between life and death and death and life, Oya owns the fleet of ships that the ubiquitous myth of West Africa claims to be the vehicles that transport the dead across the three rivers separating this world from the other world.[145]

This is consistent with her appearance in the novel on the day of carnival which was accompanied by decaying dying roses.[146] "A Fully Dressed (sic) woman walked out of the water" [147] dressed in black cloth. Gleason notes, "The black cloth is only a shape she [Oya] assumes when those she's partial to find themselves hard pressed."[148] The motif of the black dress recurs in section eight of Part One, "Her black skirt swayed

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[143]Morrison, Beloved 65.

[144]Gleason 9.

[145]Gleason 49.

[146] Ayto records carnival as meaning "raising flesh." Ayto 98. The American Heritage Dictionary of The English Language cites the meaning as "to put away flesh."

[147] Morrison, Beloved 50.

[148] Gleason 50.

from side to side."[149] And finally, "Beloved dropped the folds of her skirt. It spread around her. The hem darkened in the water."[150] The origin of the Joliba (Niger) river, is explained in the myth of Oya's tearing the black cloth which formed the river making the kingdom of Nupe an island.

Paul D is busy trying to determine the nature of Beloved, this shining that he cannot place, "silver fish," "dark water," "glistening." He wonders about her intentions. "But if her shining was not for him, who then? "[151] He decides that he wants this "water-drinking woman" [152] out of his life. Although he wants her to leave, he thinks, although he could dispel a ghost he couldn't put Beloved out and leave her to the mercy of the Klan. Even the manner in which he personifies the Klan, "Desperately thirsty for black blood, without which it could not live, the dragon swam the Ohio River at will" [153] is consistent with the imagery employed in the description of Beloved."

The parallels between Oya and Beloved are abundant in this novel, and it is beyond the scope of this

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[149] Morrison, Beloved 74.

[150] Morrison, Beloved 105.

[151]Morrison, Beloved 65.

[152]Morrison, Beloved 66.

[153]Morrison, Beloved 66.

chapter to analyze them all. However, from the examples given thus far, the point has been sufficiently made as to Beloved's identity as the African archetype Oya whose presence is indicative of the reconciliation of death crucial to Sethe's healing. Also, as an archetype, she has assisted Sethe by furnishing guidance and by rekindling the necessary memories in Sethe to give her direction on the journey. By unveiling the memories, Beloved assists Sethe on her quest by enabling her to confront their collective pain. And finally as a primordial image, she has provided a sense of release of the hidden stresses not readily accessible to Sethe's conscious mind.

Now that the ancestor, Baby Suggs, has been claimed, the emergence of African archetypes has occurred. What remains are the proper rituals to empower Sethe on her journey. The next element to be considered in this chapter is the use of rituals employed in the novel. In African culture, ritual is the harnessing of spiritual power to activate change. It is also presents itself as a necessary literary component. In From Folklore to Fiction, H. Nigel Thomas notes the importance of rituals in African American literature:

> While the inclusion of archetypal figures from black folklore in the Afro-American writer's character portraits gives added significance to his work, it is in the

> rituals of his characters that we see the values, profoundest beliefs, and existential outlook of the black folk.[154]

As Morrison depicts the characters in the novel, a distinct picture of their allegiance to African world beliefs is apparent. At this juncture, it is important to establish a clear definition of ritual. Thomas defines ritual as:

> Those forms of behavior devised by a people over long periods of time to reinforce the key values of their culture and to promote social harmony and individual and group confidence. This definition implies that ritual is a way of ordering the chaos of existence or a way of programming the individual within the society so that he or she does not fall victim to that chaos.[155]

In this chapter, it has already been demonstrated in the Clearing scene, in the appearance of the antelope masked dancers, and the exorcism of the Baby Ghost by Paul D how ritual behavior functions in creating the harmony suggested in this passage. For example, the prayer ritual (ring shout) helped to relieve tensions as the community set their burdens down and danced in spiritual bliss, the people dancing the antelope were able to "shift shapes" and become something other, and the driving out of the baby ghost caused a peace to

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[154]H. Nigel Thomas, From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1988) 111.

[155]Thomas 111.

descend on the tormented house and occupants. The following discussion concerns the three rituals that assist Sethe to overcome her sense of violation. These rituals are categorized as initiating, mediating, and culminating.

The initiating ritual is performed by Stamp Paid. True to the nature of ritual behavior, he carries out the ritual for the benefit of Sethe and ultimately the entire community. Brandon discusses the uniqueness of ritual as human specific behavior:

> Human beings exist at the center of the universe. Their ability to carry out ritual gives them the awesome responsibility because it is unique. Only humans can carry out rituals on behalf of all other beings; only humans can sacrifice and empower objects with ashé (asé) It is only humans who have the ability to create and sustain the harmony, freshness, and balance that ought to exist in the universe.[156]

In addition to being a Muntu, Stamp Paid is also a personification of a river priest. His familiarity with the Ohio river suggests a knowledge of the river beyond the mundane. "He knew the secrets of the Ohio river and its banks".[157] He is described as, "sly", "steely", "old", "black", "man", "agent", "fisherman",

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[156]George Brandon, The Dead Tell Memories: Santeria from Africa to the New World (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 17.

[157]Morrison, Beloved 170.

"boatman", "tracker", "savior", and a "spy".[158] The implied narrator says: "It was Stamp Paid who started it."[159] His going "off with two buckets to a place near the river's edge that only he knew about where blackberries grew"[160] was a the initiating act. The fruit he brings back is described as being consecrated: "to eat them was like being in church", "[eating] Just one of the berries and you felt anointed." [161] This gathering of fruit is the ritual preparation for the community's full moon feast.

This ritual performed by Stamp Paid as river priest was complete with blood sacrifice. Because of the inaccessibility of the berries, he only reached them by going through "brambles lined with blood-drawing thorns thick as knives that cut through his shirts and trousers."[162] Not only did the plant kingdom participate in the ritualistic sacrifice, but a cadre of insects, "mosquitoes, bees, hornets, wasps and the meanest lady spider in the state."[163]

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[158]Morrison, Beloved [passim]

[159]Morrison, Beloved 135.

[160]Morrison, Beloved 135-136.

[161]Morrison, Beloved 136.

[162]Morrison, Beloved 136.

[163]Morrison, Beloved 136.

The detail of the spider as a female portends the death to be visited upon 124. In The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets, Barbara G. Walker explains, "The female spider's habit of devouring her mate led to identification of the spider with the death goddess."[164]

It was after Stamp Paid brought the berries on a full moon day (a time of abundance) just twenty-eight days[165] after Sethe's arrival that the stage was set. Baby Suggs had decided to do something for the man who had demonstrated his love by going through such an ordeal to get the berries. "That's how it began."[166] Like the female spider's poison, resentment filled the air in the form of envious whispers disguised as concerns for the excesses they all knew to fend off, even on the north shore of the river.

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[164]Barbara G. Walker, The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) 958.

[165]In the menstrual cycle the release of the egg (berry) is a time of decay that prepares for the renewal the release of a new egg. In a similar fashion, symbolically when the moon reaches its potential in its waxing, it must prepare for its waning or death. In traditional African practices both the new moon and the full moon are times of heightened ritual behavior in order to insure the success of the community on all levels. Also the moon phases are thought to have chemical effects on food, people, tides (both river and ocean) and are therefore to be propitiated by ritual sacrifice.

[166]Morrison, Beloved 136.

> Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things: How come she always know exactly what to do and when? Giving Advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing, and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. . . Loaves and fishes were His powers. . .[167]

For this excess, the community registered its disapproval and demanded a sacrifice. Their displeasure became evident when they failed to warn the Suggs family that strangers were in town heading toward 124. Therefore, the feast is the necessary event that provides one of the primary conflicts to be resolved in the novel. The next to be explored is the mediating ritual conducted by Paul D, a singing man, who had "experienced life on a plantation, a chain gang, and traveling around."[168] The significance of his ritual is that by sharing his pain with Sethe he helps to reconcile her to some of her pain. Described as a man who has dealt with so much pain that his heart was hardened "a tobacco tin lodged in his chest," he brought a view of his past to Sethe which allowed her to confront some of the horror from her own locked up past. The narrator states:

> She knew Paul D was adding something to her life--something she wanted to count on but

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[167]Morrison, Beloved 137.

[168]Morrison, Beloved 41.

> was scared to. Now he had added more: new pictures and old rememories that broke her heart.[169]

Ironically, the breaking of her heart is a pivotal part of her healing. Having arrived at the crossroad of pain she must chart the next direction. She can go down the healing path or continue to travel down the dead-end of non-action.[170]

And finally, Paul D makes Sethe feel love through the sharing of the song called his life. With his love Sethe is able to find a modicum of joy. "She let her head touch his chest. . . not even caring if a passerby passed them by."[171] Paul who wants to put his story next to hers, represents more than a stopover halfway through the journey; he provides a way for her to continue on her journey.

The culminating ritual or last rites[172] occur when Denver, recognizing that her mother is being consumed by Beloved's greedy "love," signals for help by leaving the safety of the front porch with ancestral

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[169]Morrison, Beloved 95.

[170]Paul D. re-connects her to the community when he takes her and Denver to the carnival. A truce is effected by her presence which suggests a willingness to reach out to the community.

[171]Morrison, Beloved 129.

[172]Consistent with the cyclical nature of the African worldview, the last rites establish the condition for rebirth and regeneration.

guidance from Baby Suggs in the form of remembrance. Morrison writes:

> Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked-and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. "You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my. But you said there was no defense. "There ain't. "Then what do I do? "Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on."[173]

Two things occur when Denver finally follows Baby Suggs' advice and steps out of 124. One leads to a personal healing and another leads to a communal cleansing. Telling Lady Jones of her family's physical hunger paves the way for the women to make peace with the house (124) and its inhabitants through food offerings. This a ritualized way of re-connecting to the ancestor for the community's behalf. These "sacks of white beans," "plates of cold rabbit meat," and "baskets of eggs,"[174] were accompanied with names even when there was no plate or bowl to return, "the names were nevertheless there."[175] This response to Denver's request for help operates on two levels.

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[173]Morrison, Beloved 244.

[174]Morrison, Beloved 249.

[175]Morrison, Beloved 249.

First, it meets the pressing need to diminishing hunger and secondly, by placing their names on the offerings, the women make peace with the ancestor, Baby Suggs.

The women then responded by tapping into the power of the oral tradition via *NOMMO*--the "grapevine." After the "story is properly blown up and themselves sufficiently agitated,"[176] the women were led by Ella "who convinced the others that rescue was in order."[177] As a preliminary to the ritual, Baby Suggs is invoked through remembrance by the community of women:

> All of them knew her grandmother and some had even danced with her in the Clearing. Others remembered the days when 124 was a way station, the place they assembled to catch news, taste ox-tail soup, leave their children, cut out a skirt. One remembered the tonic mixed there that cured a relative. One showed her the border of a pillowslip, the stamens of its pale blue flowers French-knotted in Baby Suggs' kitchen by the light of an oil lamp while arguing the settlement fee.[178]

Disarmed by these memories of 124 and Baby Suggs the women "talk" themselves through "rememory" into forgiving 124 and the people in it for their sins of pride and excess. The final ritual resembles a burial,

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[176]Morrison, Beloved 255.

[177]Morrison, Beloved 256.

[178]Morrison, Beloved 249.

a culminating ritual with which most people have a familiarity. Raboteau writes:

> Because of the powerful position of the ancestors, burial rites became very important. Improper or incomplete funeral rites can interfere or delay the entrance of the deceased into the spiritual world and may cause his soul to linger about, as a restless and malevolent ghost.[179]

The women came to bury the ghost, Baby Suggs and the rift, formed in the past that has kept the "village" from being united. They came to observe the proper rites which they had not observed the first time. For if they had been carried out properly, the spirit of the deceased would not have troubled the living. Mintz and Price comment on the problems associated with the omission of appropriate rituals. They remark:

> At death, new problems of social and spiritual identity arise. When a family loses one of its members, especially a senior member, a significant moral and social gap occurs. The family together with other kinsmen must close this gap and reconstitute itself through a series of ritual and social adjustments. At the same time, the soul of the deceased must also undergo a series of spiritual adjustments if he or she is to find a secure place in the afterlife and continue to remain in contact with the family left behind.[180]

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[179]Albert J.Raboteau Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford UP, 1978) 13.

[180]Mintz and Price 140.

Stuckey agrees that the concern for the spirit is tied to concern for a proper burial, for without a proper burial, the spirit is certain to be restless, and that restlessness can lead to problems for those responsible for the burial.[181]

They were improperly handled the first time: "Baby Suggs was buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation and spite."[182] The woman came this time in the spirit of cooperation and unity. Armed with the talismans connected to remembrances from another time and place they came. The narrator states:

> Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith--as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both. They had no idea what they would do once they got there. They just started out, walked down Bluestone Road and came together at the agreed upon time.[183]

The group, assembled in the manner of an African council around the village tree, substantiated the idea that issues of morality are a communal concern and warrant input and consideration. Ella, inspired by her

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[181]Stuckey 359.

[182]Morrison, Beloved 171.

[183]Morrison, Beloved 257.

own haunting memories, "set her jaws working" and "hollered". The women followed in suit:

> Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what the sound sounded like.[184]

Through their unified effort, these women had reached the nexus of *NOMMO* (sound) and *NTU* (harmony) and were able to transcend **Kintu** (time) In this rewriting of John 1:1, "In the beginning was the **sound. . .** " they validated their own power to define. This was a people who collectively understood sound and testified to its pre-eminence over words. With its "heat of simmering leaves," "right combinations" of keys, codes and sounds that "broke the back of words," Sethe was baptized in the strength of their collective sound. Soyinka interprets this dynamic:

> Language reverts in religious rites to its pristine existence, eschewing the sterile limits of particularization. In cult funerals, the circle of initiate mourners, an ageless swaying grove of dark pines, raises a chant around a mortar of fire, and words are taken back to their roots, to their original poetic sources when fusion was total and the movement of words was the very passage of music and the dance of images.[185]

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[184]Morrison, Beloved 259.

[185]Soyinka 148.

Morrison gives a clue to the composite nature and the dimension of the kind of sound emitted by the women. In her article, "Rediscovering Black History" she writes:

> A sound, a very special sound. A sound made up of all the elements that distinguished black life (its peculiar brand of irony, oppression, versatility, madness, joy, strength, shame, honor, triumph, grace and stillness) as well as those qualities that identified it with all of mankind (compassion, anger, foolishness, courage, self-deception and vision).[186]

As a result of tapping into the power of the cosmic sound, both Sethe and the community emerge from the ritual experience charged with new strength, restored, and in harmony. Her transformation to wholeness or her re-integration is made possible through the journey back to the creative source. Mintz and Price note the significance of the ritual:

> If someone breaks the moral rules of life, this disturbs the cosmic grains in his body, prefiguring a wider social disturbance spreading from the individual to his kinsmen, his family, his clan, and his people. But the disorder may be corrected by the appropriate rituals, which restore the individual and preserve the general order. Conversely, to perform rituals modeled upon the original acts of creation helps to maintain and revive the world.[187]

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[186]Toni Morrison, "Rediscovering Black History," New York Times Magazine 11 Aug. 1974: 16.

[187]Mintz and Price, 133.

Sethe is redeemed and released from her "too thick love," and sins of pride by the "village prayer band," and the "cape of sound" they "wrapped around her like arms to hold to steady her on the way".[188] She has been sufficiently cleansed through revision, rememory, ritual, and remembrance of the ancestor to appease the cosmic powers which direct earthly matters. With the telling of her story, a new paradigm for self, motherhood, love, and community that consists of an admixture of acceptance, sacrifice, adjustment, and rejection has been rendered and it is now possible for Sethe to consider that she could be "her own best thing."

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[188]Morrison, Beloved 152.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALWAYS: THE LIVING ANCESTOR AND THE TESTIMONY OF WILL IN SULA

There is much special about black women, the way they endure, the way they grow, the way they build, the way they love. . .

Haki Madhubuti--
"Book of Life"

I have always been just me, with no frame of reference to anything beyond myself.

Bessie Head

Following the success of Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, Sula her second, received considerable critical attention. The critical approaches, ranging from dialogues concerning the nature of good and evil to examinations of motherhood as a central metaphor, have been commendable undertakings. However, these analysis have not adequately addressed the title character's quest for self-definition. Maybe the writers of these critical essays were diverted from this particular inquiry because of the intricate layering of symbols provided in Morrison's prose; there are sufficient ideas compacted into one novel so that each critic's individual proclivity can be fulfilled. Irrespective of their considerations, it remains that the quest motif is a major critical point that begs exploration. The idea of the quest, an essential

component inherited from the epic tradition, makes a smooth transition in the novel's of Morrison. Male versions of the heroic journey usually defined by slayings, rescues, and the bringing back of treasures are revised as Morrison locates the heroic quest of Sula to a psychological mindscape defined by interiority. Although the hero does venture away from the community, there is little mention of what has occurred on her journey because heroic action is acted out within the frame of community. It is in the community where the hero's psyche, spirit, and soul gets explored. Karen Stein proposes that the shift in focus by African American women is a conscious attempt to subvert the patriarchal guises of male heroes. She further states that through the use of irony and parody that invert traditional motifs these authors are able to create new definitions of heroism that "encompass the lives of Black women."[1]

One of these re-definitions of heroism is that heroes are not always successful. This is evident in Sula where Morrison presents the idea of the failed quest attributed to the title character's detachment from community responsibility, her indifference to guidance offered by archetypal characters, and her

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[1]Karen F. Stein, "Toni Morrison's, Sula: A Black Women's Epic," Black American Literature Forum 18 (1984): 146.

excommunication from ancestral forces. Sula's insistence on rugged individualism, an "American" cultural trait that conflicts with the African communal emphasis, turns the quest into a contest of will and dooms the issue from the outset. This raises the crucial question of what then can be accomplished through an examination of the narrative? I contend that the thwarted quest presented by Morrison as a conquest empowers the reader to reverse the heroic character's actions and subsequently obtain a sense of fulfillment by default.

The purpose of this chapter is to chronicle the character's shortcomings by examining specific examples of her negligence. In keeping with Morrison's unyielding cultural perspective, archetypes and symbols that mark Sula's deviation from the imposed communal and cultural definitions as well as her rejection of the living ancestor's presence will be examined with respect to their departure from the African world view.[2]

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[2]Karla Holloway argues in Moorings and Metaphors that,"The presence of mythologies in black women writer's texts point toward the element of myth-metaphor, spirituality and memory-as they appear in the systems of literature rather than toward individual myths of West Africa" (89). I disagree with her assumption. There are precise African elements taken directly from the culture of Africa that may not have been presented as folkloric structures in African American literature. An example of this can be found in the **specific** references made to the Yoruba Orisha, Oya. Morrison's work conveys a deeper

In order to fully comprehend the implications of Sula's self-centered actions, it is essential first to examine the community from which she deviates, the archetypal guide who she fails to heed and the ancestor she rejects. One of Morrison's primary concerns has been the survival of an authentic African American community.[3] The import of the community is evidenced in the prominence that it is given within the structure of the narrative. Throughout the novel the community functions as a barometer that gauges the moral actions of Sula. The novel begins by introducing that community. The opening sentence says, "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry[4] patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City

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understanding of the tradition than the approximations made by her literary forebears because of her return to the source of the folkloric elements--Africa.

[3]The anthropologist, Marcel Maus explains that the community is the main agent of meaning and that the role of the individual is really to act out, "insofar as it concerns him, the prefigured totality of the life of the clan" (5) This conforms to the cyclical nature of community expressed by the African world view. An oft repeated African saying that demonstrates this idea is, "I am, because we are." Marcel Mauss, The Category of The Person, trans. W.D. Halls, eds. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, Steven Lukes. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 5.

[4]Both of these plants have already been discussed in Chapter Three with regard to their use in the practice of ritual and conjure. Their recurrence in this novel solidifies the endurance of the folkloric tradition in this community as well.

Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood."[5] Morrison begins the novel with a glimpse of the end. This **Hantu** (anachronistic to the Western mind) ordering of story elements alerts readers that something catastrophic has occurred to warrant this destruction and prepares them for a series of flashbacks. Following the introductory statement is a history of the origins of the town, "A Joke. A nigger joke. That was the way it got started."[6] The land where they live is the result of a compromising gesture made from a half-hearted promise by "a good white farmer." He had given the African Americans a piece of land that he considered worthless and tried to convince them that it was prime land. The land called the Bottom, difficult to work because it was hilly and windy, was transformed into a place to call home. After establishing its history, the narrator moves to the description of the types of places in the "used-to-be town." There is the "Time and a Half Pool Hall", "Irene's Palace of Cosmetology," and "Reba's Grill." Finally, the types of people that inhabit the community are portrayed. They consisted of men who wore "long tan shoes," women who had "Nu Nile lathered into their hair," a woman who cooks "in her hat because she couldn't remember the

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[5]Toni Morrison, Sula (New York: Plume, 1973) 3.

[6]Morrison, Sula 4.

ingredients without it," people who do the "cakewalk," sing, and laugh easily.[7] These descriptions sufficiently define this as an African American community whose mundane facades hint at the most extraordinary inner worlds.

The inclusion of the "Time and a Half Pool Hall" as a place of significance to the neighborhood invites the reader to conjure up familiar scenes of African American men participating in the oral tradition of "big lies" and "signifying," along with accompanying recollections of male-specific gathering places, like barber shops and lodge halls that help define the social realm of men in the African American tradition. In a similar way, Irene's Palace of Cosmetology locates the women in a particular domain designated as a women's place for the exchange of gossip, the offering of advice, and ritual grooming similar to the kitchen area in African American homes. Moreover, the inclusion of an eccentric character that needs a hat to generate memory provides a locale for the discussion of things of the spirit that may not make sense outside of the cultural confines of this neighborhood. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison discusses the importance of this cultural locale. She says:

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[7]Morrison, Sula 3-4.

> I want my books to reflect the imaginative combination of the real world, the very practical, shrewd, day to day functioning that black people must do, while at the same time they encompass some great supernatural element. We know that it does not bother them one bit to do something practical and have visions at the same time. So all the parts of living are on equal footing. Birds talk and butterflies cry, and it is not surprising or upsetting to them. These things make the world larger for them.[8]

Having briefly introduced the community, Morrison then narrows the focus to a consideration of one individual. Shadrack who is shell-shocked from his experiences with the horror of World War[9] is one of the "village's" eccentrics with wild eyes and long matted hair.[10] Shadrack is one of Morrison's conventional river characters similar to Stamp Paid in Beloved, just a little stranger. He dared to walk about with his penis out, pee in front of ladies and girl-

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[8]Morrison, Interview With Nellie McKay 428.

[9]Morrison's introduction of a male character as the first focal point of her narrative is a pattern initiated in Sula that would be repeated in Tar Baby and Song of Solomon. Also significant is his name. Shad is the name of a member of the herring family that ascend rivers in the spring to spawn. It also suggests shadow. Finally, Shadrack was one of the trio of Hebrews who refused to change their names under Babylonian captivity and was sentenced to die in the fiery furnace. He, as well as Daniel and the others were spared as they were delivered by an angel.

[10]The use of the terms eccentric and peculiar are not confined to their usual connotations and are not meant to be pejorative. In the context of this study, the term is extended and describes those who primarily listen to "things of the spirit" or who are "in touch with nature."

children, curse white people and get away with it, drink in the road from the mouth of the bottle, and shout and shake in the streets.[11] He also resembles her peculiar men like Soaphead Church in The Bluest Eye, whose business was to "Overcome Spells, Bad luck and Evil Influences,"[12] Robert Smith, the insurance agent who jumps off the roof of Mercy hospital in Song of Solomon in an attempt to fly, and Son in Tar Baby whose overpowering hair which was "wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail"[13] matched his uncontrollable passion.

Shadrack represents the male construct of the "free" or "uninhibited" self, depictions that also define Sula. He was not always this way, but as the story goes, because of his inability to cope with the horrors of war, he ties "the loose cords in his mind" and returns to a far away time. Morrison expresses it in this fashion:

> The fear and longing were too much for him, so he began to think of other things. That is, he lets his mind slip into whatever cave mouths of memory it chose.[14]

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[11]Morrison, Sula 15.

[12]Morrison, Bluest 137.

[13]Morrison, Tar Baby 113.

[14]Morrison, Sula 10.

This excursion through memory is an ancestral flight that takes him "somewhere" where he collects the cultural information needed to re-integrate his shattered psyche. The omniscient narrator reports what Shadrack finds while in this trance-like state which consists of "more than a year, only eight days of which he fully recollected"[15]: "He saw a window that looked out on a river which he knew was full of fish" and heard someone "speaking softly just outside the door. . ."[16] This river as memory matrix explained in Chapter Three situates Shadrack as one of the priests of a river Orisha. The soft voices are the whispering of the ancestors, and the door signifies a metaphysical separation between the dimensions of spirit and matter.

The description of his discharge from the hospital further cements this idea of his being a river initiate, specifically a devotee of Oya, the Orisha who controls the wind. His departure from the hospital is distinguished by an accompanying wind that made the "heads of trees toss", thoughts of making people disappear with "a good high wind" that would "pull them up and away." Furthermore, his first steps towards his new life are referred to as, "Shadrack took the

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[15]Morrison, Sula 11.

[16]Morrison, Sula 10.

plunge"[17] and his journey is marked by the images of rebirth and the severing of his past life point to another connection with Oya, the guardian of death. The narrator explains:

> Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was. . . with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, nothing nothing to do. . .[18]

The enumeration of items emphasizes his separation not from the military, but from the material world, a significant point that confirms his initiation. Sometimes, the initiation oracle prescribes the relinquishing of all material possessions to mark the transition from an earthly existence to one dictated by spirit. Moreover, it confirms his allegiance with Oya who like Shadrack is perpetually transitional, without a past, familial ties or home.[19]

After a short journey, beset by problems, he arrives "home" to Medallion[20], to his river. As a

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[17]Morrison, Sula 10-11.

[18]Morrison, Sula 12.

[19]Gleason 49.

[20]The word medallion further solidifies the idea of rank. As a cognate of the word medal, it indicates an acknowledgement of something of consequence to be duly noted. It is also the physical equivalent of a "title."

river priest ordained by the ancestors and enlightened by discoveries made on the journey, he is free to assume his initiate duties unobstructed by considerations of sanctions from the community. Estranged from others, living in a shack on "the river bank that had once belonged to his "grandfather long time dead,"[21] he fashions a way to ritually deal with fear and the ultimate manifestation of dread the fear of death:

> He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it out he hit upon the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day.[22]

Armed with his ritual implements consisting of bells, a rope, and a song, he re-establishes the idea of collective rituals. Trudier Harris sees the significance of his bell and rope as "a barrier to Shadrack's desire to impart truth".[23] Her

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[21]The fact that his grandfather is not mentioned by name, but referred to as "long time dead" hints that his grandfather who lived on the river may have been a river priest of Oya as well. He too lived at the edge of town and made his living on the river. Most of the character's names in Toni Morrison's novels suggest their personality or other significant attributes.

[22]Morrison, Sula 14.

[23]Trudier Harris, Fiction And Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1991) 61-62.

observations are made by comparing his devices to Tiresias's blindness and Diogene's lamp.[24] Her analysis, steeped in Euro-centric myth, provides a very different picture of Shadrack from the one sketched by an African world perspective. From the viewpoint of the latter, Shadrack's "tools" cannot be seen as barriers, but a means to re-acquaint the people of Medallion with the relevance of ritual in their lives. The bell functions in two important ways. First, it issues a wake-up call admonishing the townspeople to attend to the spirit. Furthermore, on a metaphysical level, it spiritually cleans the town of negative influences.[25] The rope is symbolic of the binding or fastening needed to engender community cohesion and the song,[26] referred to as a dirge, combines the harmonizing principle of *NTU* and the innervating principle of *NOMMO*. By reinstating ritual into the foundation of "village" life, Shadrack tethers the

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[24]Harris 61-62.

[25]The bell is used in spiritual rituals in various faiths to exorcise negative spirits and restore a sense of balance. In the Yoruba culture bells are the instruments associated with all the river-rain Orisha.

[26]In the novel ritual behavior is a manifestation of the will. Ritual is sometimes the only effective manifestation of willful reconciliation to ones' perception of reality. Therefore as a symbol of will, ritual functions as a expression of the will.

people of the community to a set of beliefs that legitimatizes their experience.

His value as a genuine and contributing member of society is apparent in the way he is "accepted" in the community. For example, even though the people consider him to be "crazy" they don't summarily dismiss him. His peculiarity "did not mean that he didn't have any sense, or even more important, that he had no power."[27] Over time, the people fit him into the scheme of their lives. That is, "Once they understood the boundaries and nature of his madness."[28]

Shadrack's fusion into the fabric of life is so exhaustive that people in the town actually record time by references to these rituals. One character comments to another about the onset of labor pains, "The pains started on Suicide Day and kept up till the following Sunday." Still, others make plans with respect to the day, "Let's do it after New Year's. . . OK, but make sure it ain't on Suicide Day."[29] In addition, local lore begins to develop around the day, a grandmother

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[27]Morrison, Sula 15.

[28]Morrison, Sula 15. Mental illness in traditional African society is seen as a affliction of the spirit. In many cases the treatment prescribed to alleviate the condition amounts to placating the spirits or gods by making sacrifices. Also, those in mental distress are not isolated from the general population and due to daily interaction are absorbed and accepted.

[29]Morrison, Sula 15-16.

reports that her "hens always started a laying of double yolks right after Suicide Day."[30] In this manner, Suicide Day became a part of life by being provided with the ceremonial and mythic elements necessary for its smooth incorporation into community life.

The characters next introduced in the novel are the members of the family of Helene Wright. Helene, the daughter of a Creole prostitute from New Orleans, was born in the brothel where her mother worked, and was raised by her maternal grandmother, a deeply religious woman. The significance of her character is that she represents a person whose life's quest has been to effect a severe break from the past. Having returned to New Orleans after nine[31] years to attend her grandmother's, Cécile Sabat's, funeral, Helene's complete rejection of her own mother indicates both an ancestral and cultural rupture. She disapproves of her profession, her appearance: eyebrows darkened with the burnt heads of matches, her smell which consists of a heavy scent of gardenias, the bright colors she wears,and the Creole she speaks.[32] She tells Nell,

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[30]Morrison, Sula 16.

[31]Note the repetition of this number in the discussion in Chapter Three.

[32]The significance of the rejection of the bright colors is due to Helene's acculturation into an European

her young daughter who is fascinated by Rochelle's appearance and deportment, "I don't talk Creole and neither do you."[33]

This demonstration of a cultural rift or aesthetic negation is further demonstrated when Helene encourages Nell to reshape the "nose her mother hated."[34] Helene says, "Don't just sit there, honey. You could be pulling your nose. . . "[35] By ordering her to pull or pinch her nose with clothespins to discourage its broadness, Morrison reinforces the deleterious effects of subscribing to another's aesthetic standards, especially when it negates one's own.[36]

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aesthetic sensibility considerations. Many African Americans both male and female are admonished not to wear bright colors because European Americans don't wear them. These rejections signal a deeper rejection of things that are considered African. For some African Americans, these African cultural tendencies are to be shunned in order to assimilate into the larger American cultural milieu. In the same vein, the speaking of Creole with its African-based morphology and syntactic structures would be discouraged as it would further hinder the complete absorption into American society. Both language and clothing are phenomena that tie African people to an expression of *Kuntu*.

[33]Morrison, Sula 27.

[34]Morrison, Sula 28.

[35]Morrison, Sula 28.

[36]This theme was first introduced in The Bluest Eye. In that novel, the focus was on the protagonist's obsession with having blue eyes that would make her beautiful, acceptable, and worthy of being loved. Morrison repeats the fixation this time with reference to the nose. Her basic message in these motifs is that some African Americans are dependent on the cultural dictates

Helene is a self-righteous member of the most conservative African American church and has virtually driven her daughter's "imagination underground." Her character is important to the development of the novel because she illustrates the judgmental nature of small town life. In fact, the first mention of Sula is in reference to a judgement.[37] Having recently returned home, Nell Wright contemplates leaving Medallion as a way to express the sense of "me-ness" gained by the experiences of her trip to New Orleans, she changes her mind after she meets Sula. Sula is "the girl she had seen for five years at Garfield Primary but never played with, never knew, because her mother said that Sula's mother was sooty."[38] This new-found "me-ness" empowers her to extend friendship to Sula. What helps in the cultivation of Nell's friendship with Sula is Helene's reversal of her judgement of Sula. Sula didn't have her mother's (Hannah) "slackness."

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of others for their own affirmation.

[37]In a Publisher's Weekly interview with Amanda Smith, Morrison talks about this aspect of small town life. In speaking of the "layer upon layer" of adults who participated in her life she says, "That was also something that made me feel, oh, boy, wait till I get out of this place, because I am tired of all these people who can meddle with me" (50). She says that the town is both "a support system and a hammer at the same time"(50). Toni Morrison, interview "Toni Morrison," With Amanda Smith. Publisher's Weekly 21 Aug. 1987.

[38]Morrison, Sula 29.

Helene's judgement of Sula changes over the course of the novel to be more in concert with what the community thinks of her.

This consideration of the community before the formal introduction of the title character attests to the significance of community as one of the concentric circles that define the individual's existence. Morrison's introduction of the characters in the community preoccupies a major portion of the novel; during this expose Sula is only referred to. This attests to the primacy of community with respect to the individual.

The next significant member of the community introduced is Eva, who symbolizes the living ancestral presence in the novel. Unlike Helene's orderly clean house, hers is disorderly and Nell likes to come to this earthy home where there "is a constant stream of borders."[39] The house is described as:

> [The] woolly house, where a pot of something was always on the stove; where the mother, Hannah never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers are stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or *read you a dream* (emphasis added).[40]

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[39]Morrison, Sula 30.

[40]Morrison, Sula 29.

This house "of many rooms"[41] where dreams co-exist with the mundane is the home of the matriarch Eva one of the trio of women who are also occupants.[42] Encircling Eva is a body of myth which marks her in a way similar to other "odd" characters presented in Morrison's novels. As an ancestral figure, Eva's power lies in her will to survive. This will is clearly seen in her personality. "She tells everybody what to do, and she will dispute everybody."[43] The authority

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[41]Holloway refers to places like these as "places of the spirit" (183).

[42]This trio of women is also another leitmotif used by Morrison. In the _Bluest Eye_ there is the trio of prostitutes, China, Poland, and the Maginot Line who lived under one roof as well as Claudia, Frieda, and Mrs. MacTeer another trio of women. In _Song of Solomon_ there is Ruth, First Corinthians, and Magdalene called Lena. In that same novel Pilate's house consists of Pilate, Reba, and Hagar. In _Beloved_, 124 the female occupants are Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. There is multiple significance in the homes being defined by a trio of women. For example, there is a story for each of the women as there is a story in every name. These stories help to erase a layer of stereotypes or basic stock characters that formed a major part of the African American tradition. Also, because these households, for the most part, consist of inter-generational women, a sense of continuity is provided in these stories as a context is created for understanding the traditions of the past and a feeling for the direction of the future. Samuels and Weems add, "By including distinct communities of women, Morrison allows us to see individuals who refused to be destroyed by external definitions of the other" (25). Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems, _Toni Morrison_ (Boston: Twayne, 1990) 25. In addition to the three women there are other trios such as the **three** Deweys, the date of Suicide Day, the **third** of January, the **three** ritual elements used by Shadrack, and the **three** beets that motivates Eva's journey of survival.

[43]McKay interview 418.

that she manifests has been gained through her will to survive when others in similar situations might have given up. By tapping into the power of the will she has become a survivor who outlives all of her children. She is like Morrison's own ancestor, her grandmother, Ardelia, who Morrison describes as having faith in the magic "that can be wrought by sheer effort of the will. . ."[44]

Eva Peace also represents the sacrificing mother. After her husband abandons her, she is left alone to provide for three children. The narrator says, "She would have to scrounge around and beg through the winter, until her baby was at least **nine** months old, then she could plant and maybe hire herself out."[45] But when things don't work out and she is down to her last three **beets**, she leaves her three children with Mrs. Suggs and returns **eighteen** months later "with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg."[46] Her return is accompanied by rumors that she stuck her leg under the railroad car in order to collect a monthly pension check.

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[44]Toni Morrison, "A Slow Walk of Trees (As Grandmother Would Say), Hopeless (As Grandfather Would Say)," New York Times Magazine 4 July 1976: 152.

[45]Morrison, Sula 33.

[46]Morrison, Sula 34.

Her maternal sacrifices are not limited to this one act of willful behavior. When Eva's only son, Plum[47] decides on irresponsibility and retreats in his basement room into a world of helplessness and drugs, she sets him ablaze. But, before she ritually burns him, she anoints him with kerosene, rocks him and loves him. This murder is not done out of anger or malice, but out of love. As Eva pours kerosene over him "Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right. . ."[48] Hallissey explains that when women murder, they murder ceremonially. In addition she discusses the nature of the victims. She says:

> Women do indeed murder very little, but when they do, the victim is almost always a loved one. It is a paradox, but also a truism, of ceremonial justice that women are unlikely to kill anyone but loved ones--women kill parents, children, lovers, husbands, or

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[47]In this novel, as in Beloved, there are significant references to Oya. For example, the number eighteen that can be reduced to nine recurs as the amount of time Eva spends away from her family making her sacrifice. Usually when "items" are offered to Oya, "as many as nine are offered at one time" (Niemark 124). Moreover, Plum's name is significant because it represents one of the fruits that are ritually sacrificed to her when a devotee makes a "ebo" or sacrifice. Philip Niemark notes that in addition to eggplants which are her favorite, *plums* or *purple* or *red* grapes are offered because the dark skin matches this "purple" Orisha (124). Also note the connection of Eva being down to her last three beets a purplish-red vegetable that motivates her journey.

[48]Morrison, Sula 47.

> themselves, but almost never do they kill strangers.[49]

Years later when Hannah confronts Eva about Plum's death, Eva replies, ". . . he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well. . .I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it.[50]

Although some critics have commented on the incestuous nature of Eva's statement, I suggest that a mother's despair, not incest is her motive. Because of the futility of Plum's addiction, Eva decides to control the circumstances of his inevitable death. Eva's control over death is consonant with the identity of Oya who is the guard of the cemetery and as such has mastery and control of death. Eva justifies her actions:

> After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well....I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it....He was a man, girl, a big old growed-up man. I didn't have that much room. I kept on dreaming it. Dreaming it and I knowed it was true. One night it wouldn't be no dream. It'd be true and I would have done it, would have let him if I'd've had the room but a big man can't be a baby all wrapped up inside his mammy no more; he suffocate.[51]

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[49]Margaret Hallissy, Venomous Woman: Fear of the Female in Literature (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) xii.

[50]Morrison, Sula 71.

[51]Morrison, Sula 71-72.

In the novel, Eva's version of motherhood constantly comes into question. Her brand of mother-love escapes definition. Interesting to note is that Oya refuses definition[52] In fact, when her own daughter is not clear about the nature of her love, Eva asserts that she will not be judged by any criteria other than her own. Hannah questions her mother in an attempt to ascertain the shape and condition of her love, "Mama did you ever love us"? Eva answers, "No. I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin.'"[53] Morrison shows that mother's love is not always understood and is constantly questioned by the offspring. Barbara Christian states, "She loved her children enough to stay alive and keep them alive; she needn't be physically endearing to them."[54] Eva explains to Hannah the prevailing dictum of motherhood, survival:

> You setten' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two maggot holes full of maggots if I hadn't" ...You want me to tinkle you under the jaw and forget bout them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to play ring around the rosies.[55]

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[52]Gleason 291.

[53]Morrison, Sula 67.

[54]Christian, Black Women 158.

[55]Morrison, Sula 69.

Eva delivers the final retort to Hannah's question:

> Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895...What would I look like leapin' round that room playin' with youngins with three beets to my name?...No time, there wasn't no time. Not none. Soon as I get one day done here comes a night. With you coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off and if you was sleepin'; quiet I thought, O lord they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin'. What you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl. I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?[56]

Eva demonstrates another act of love when she sees Hannah on fire and leaps out of the second floor in an attempt to save the emblazoned Hannah in the yard below:

> Using her stump as a support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure.[57]

In addition to her will to survive and her strong sense of self-sacrifice, Eva is also described as a woman who "know things." Alice Walker describes these women as those who:

> . . . dreamed dreams that no one knew-not even themselves, in any coherent fashion-and saw visions no one could understand. They wandered or sat about the countryside crooning lullabies to ghosts, and drawing the

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[56]Morrison, Sula 69.

[57]Morrison, Sula 75-76.

> mother of Christ in charcoal on courthouse walls.[58]

Coupled with her distress following Hannah's death, is Eva's despair at not having recognized the signs that prefigured her daughter's death. Eva reconstructs the signs according to the dictates of **Hantu**. The first sign recounted is actually the second. The narrator says, "The second strange thing was Hannah's coming into her room. . ." with the "evil wonderin.'"[59] Later she recalls the first strange thing:

> But before the second strange thing, there had been the wind, which was the first. The very night before the day Hannah had asked Eva if she had ever loved them, the wind tore over the hills rattling roofs and loosening doors. Everything shook, and although the people were frightened they thought it meant rain and welcomed it.[60]

But, the rain never came, "the wind just swept through."[61] Eva recalls Hannah's mentioning of her "dream of the wedding in the red dress."[62]

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[58]Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mother's Gardens (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 232.

[59]Morrison, Sula 67.

[60]Morrison, Sula 72.

[61]Morrison, Sula 73. This wind indicates the presence of Oya as the wind is one of her spiritual manifestations. The use of the word swept is associated with a broom, one of Oya's chief symbols.

[62]Morrison, Sula 74.

The omniscient narrator reports:

> Later she would remember it as the third strange thing. She had thought it odd even then, but the red in the dream confused her. But she wasn't certain that it was third or not because Sula was acting up, fretting the deweys and meddling the newly married couple. Because she was thirteen, everybody supposed her nature was coming down. . .[63]

The next sign related is the actual lighting of the fire that would eventually burn Hannah." "Eva looked out the window and saw Hannah bending to light the yard fire. And that was the fifth (or fourth, if you didn't count Sula's craziness) strange thing."[64] This final recollection is crucial because of its association with death. "She remembered the wedding dream and recalled that weddings always meant death. And the red gown, well that was the fire, as she should have known."[65]

Besides being able to understand signs. Eva also has the ability to "see" things thought to be hidden. Toward the end of the novel when Nell Wright goes to visit Eva in the nursing home, Eva tells Nell that she

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[63]Morrison, Sula 74.

[64]Morrison, Sula 75.

[65] Morrison, Sula 77. In Sherley Anne William's novel, Dessa Rose, the ancestral voice that informs the title character reports, "To dream of death is a sign of marriage. . . A dream of marriage is a sign of death. . ." (58-59). Sherley Anne Williams, Dessa Rose (New York: William Morrow, 1986) 58-59. This is an example of the many deliberate contradictions in the novel. If Eva is a woman who "knows" things why isn't she able to discern the signs?

saw what happened to Chicken Little. Nell is stunned by Eva's clarity because she had pushed her participation in the event into the deep spaces of memory. She thinks:

> What did Eva mean by you watched? How could she help seeing it? She was right there. But Eva didn't say see, she said watched. 'I did not watch it. I just saw it.' But it was there anyway, as it had always been, the old feeling and the old question. All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula's frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity, and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation. Just as the water closed peacefully over the turbulence of Chicken Little's body, so had contentment washed over her enjoyment.[66]

Ogunyeni credits Eva's knowledge of this event, not to her clairvoyancy but to a confession. He says, "apparently Sula makes a confession to Eva to explain her distraught state after Chicken Little's death and during the funeral.[67] I disagree with his observation and assert that Eva is such a person who is capable of "knowing" things through dreams, visions, and in other ways with as much accuracy as if gained from "worldly sources" evidenced by statements like, "Plum. Sweet

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[66]Morrison, Sula 170.

[67]Chikwenye Okononjo Ogunyemi, "Sula: A Nigger Joke," Black American Literature Forum 13 (1979): 131.

Plum. He tells me things."[68] Eva as a strong figure capable of personal sacrifice and vision is "a fitting ancestor of Sula."[69] The importance of her character will be made more evident in the following discussion of Sula. In short, all the characters presented so far, Eva, Helene, and Shadrack, establish the predominance of the idea of survival. Eva has survived desertion from a husband who left her to take care of three small children. Helene has survived the shame of being the daughter of a Creole whore, and Shadrack has survived the war. This discussion of survival is an important springboard to the discussion of Sula and the examination of her failure to endure the trials of her quest.

Jane Bakerman attributes Sula's failed quest to her inability to learn the lesson of true friendship[70] while others have argued that because of her "evil" nature her quest was doomed. There have been many reasons given concerning Sula's failed quest for selfhood, the sum of which amount to her insistence upon experimentation. The self she creates results in

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[68]Morrison, Sula 161.

[69]Grace Hovet and Barbara Lounsberry, "Principles of Perception in Toni Morrison's Sula," Black American Literature Forum 13 (1989): 127.

[70]Jane S. Bakerman, "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison," American Literature 52 (1981): 549.

the breaking of the circle, the foundation that defines a complete individual. The circle consists of many constituents besides the individual: the community, spirit guides, and the ancestors. Although psychologist, Naim Akbar speaks about the self as a kind of community,[71] he is clear concerning the role of that individual member. He states, "The proper ruler of the community is the one whose interest is not for personal advancement but for the advancement of the community."[72]

The significance given to the community is evident in the inordinate amount of time allotted for the discussion of the community in the novel. Deborah McDowell comments on the deferment of the discussion of Sula. She says:

> Bearing *her* name the narrative suggests that she is the protagonist, the privileged center, but her presence is constantly deferred. We are first introduced to a caravan of characters: Shadrack, Nel, Helene, Eva, the Deweys, Tar Baby, Hannah, and Plum before we get any sustained treatment of Sula. Economical to begin with, the novel is roughly one-third over when Sula is introduced and it continues almost that long after her death.[73]

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[71]Naim Akbar, The Community of Self (Tallahassee, Florida: Mind Productions, 1985) 2.

[72]Akbar 8.

[73]Deborah E. McDowell, "The Self and the Other": Reading Toni Morrison's Sula and the Black Female Text," Critical Essays on Toni Morrison, ed. Nellie McKay (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall, 1988) 80-81.

The relationship between the narrative elements that deal directly with Sula and those that are peripheral is an expression of the balance that must exist between the individual and the community in order to maintain harmony. Sula's departure from community responsibility illustrates this rift. She moves away from the harmony dictated by the principles of Ma'at and resorts instead to a preoccupation with physical pleasures, an intractable will, and blatant disregard for their interests describes her behavior. Left unchecked, Sula's hedonistic tendencies become identified as her will and render her incapable of assuming the social responsibility needed to perpetuate the family.

Sula is the granddaughter of a woman who cut off her own leg in order to collect a $23.00 a month disability check; a women who poured kerosene on her only son and lit him on fire because she could not bear to see him destroy himself. She is also the daughter of a women known as the town whore whom she watched get burned alive. In short, Sula is fashioned out of the composite merging of these two bold women.

Sula appears to be motivated by a sense of self or "me-ness" as a counter to the narrow strictures that defined life for a "colored girl" in the early twentieth century. The limitations which constrained

choices for women at that time, outside of maternal roles, help to move Sula into the realm of marginality where she is neither understood or accepted. Sula, a self-created women, invents her own culture based upon her own experience. Morrison as the pervasive omniscient narrator rationalizes:

> Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings, had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor,she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.[74]

In Cane, Jean Toomer describes Avey, a female character, in a similar fashion.

> I pointed out in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them. I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her.[75]

The two mirror statements explain what was needed to make Sula whole. The danger and experimentation began after Sula overhears a conversation in which her mother says she didn't like her. The narrator states:

> Hers was an experimental life-ever since her mother's remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of

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[74]Morrison, Sula 121.

[75]Jean Toomer, Cane (1923; New York: Liveright, 1976) 46.

> responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of the river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her that there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow.[76]

After this experience, Sula is let loose, unmoored and her lack of centeredness wreaks havoc on those who surround her.

Even though Sula is matched with Nell Wright, a best friend later to become foe, this relationship still doesn't provide the necessary structure to regulate Sula's actions. Morrison describes them as inseparable with a friendship that "was as intense as it was sudden." She continues, "They found relief in each other's personality"[77] . . ."Where in the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people."[78]
It is only later on in the story that we actually become aware that Morrison misled us. This "friend-ship" is severely limited by Sula's disproportionate taking of more than what she gives.

Nell is the giver who provides Sula with a sense of self that Sula is unable to fathom alone as she has

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[76]Morrison, Sula 118-119.

[77]Morrison, Sula 53.

[78]Morrison, Sula 55.

"no compulsion to verify herself--be consistent with herself."[79] Morrison explains:

> And she had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.[80]

This self-centeredness is made clear when Sula returns to the Bottom. Her lack of dependency is highlighted against the backdrop of Nell's world defined by husband and children.

Upon her return to Medallion, Sula is reunited with her "friend" Nell who has married Jude and is busy recreating the role of motherhood according to Helene. Her home smacks of the same oppressive neatness of her mother's home and she is fastidious in the caring for her children, home and husband. It is only after seeing Sula after a ten year absence that her "ideal" situation begins to fall apart. A major irony is that although Sula is unable to define her own selfhood she "helped others to define themselves."[81] Sula's freedom was liberating for Nell. "She could listen to

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[79]Morrison, Sula 119.

[80]Toni Morrison, "Black Woman Women's Lib," New York Times Magazine 23 Aug. 1971: 63.

[81]Morrison, Sula 95.

the crunch of sugar underfoot that the children had spilled without reaching for the switch. . ."[82]

Morrison comments on this freedom:

> Well, I found Sula frightening. Her definition of freedom is do anything one wishes, and I personally would be frightened by this freedom. I think freedom is being able to choose your responsibilities. It's not not having any responsibilities, it's being able to choose the ones you wish. She seems a very contemporary woman for that reason. I find her unusually attractive to very young girls though she's not that attractive to me. I mean, as a character, yes. If you don't have any connection with other people, you cannot nurture, which she doesn't do. Her few efforts at doing it were failures. On the other hand, Nel is always there. You can leave her, and she will pay the gas bill and there will be supper, you don't have to think about that. She will nurture. And it seems to be those two aspects of femininity that are important; not just that experimental quest that Sula is involved in but also that nurturing aspect of Nel. It seems to me that both of those prongs make a complete woman.[83]

As the passage above suggests, Sula does have the capacity to nurture others however, her rejection of this dimension is attributed to her insistence on nurturing herself. For example, even though she has the potential to liberate Nell, because of her self-absorption she actually reinforces Nell's dependency. From the time that Nell catches Sula and Jude sleeping

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[82]Morrison, Sula 95.

[83]Diana Cooper-Clark, Interviews with Contemporary Novelists (New York: St. Martin, 1986) 195.

together motherhood becomes a comfort and a yoke for her. Not able to go back to her bed, the bed where she caught Jude and Sula having sex, she retreats to the safety of her children's bed. "For a long time she could not stop getting in the bed with her children and told herself each time that they might dream a dream about dragons and would need her to comfort them."[84]

In this manner, Sula enables Nell to act out her dependence. Nell serves as an ideal contrast to Sula's independence; Sula is not only oblivious to the demands of friendship but maternal and familial needs as well. This is evidenced in the unwholesome disrespect for Nell and her irreverent behavior toward Eva.[85] It is important at this juncture to spiritually identify this woman who wants to "make herself." Although this question could be answered from many perspectives, the spiritual and cultural approach initiated earlier offers a clear depiction of Sula's nature. I propose that Sula, one of Morrison's "marked" heroines represents the river Orisha, Oya as indicated by her physical description, behavior, and her association and affinity with the archetypal manifestations of this Orisha of "death."

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[84]Morrison, Sula 109.

[85]Morrison, Sula 92.

There are few physical descriptions of Sula, but the ones given provide firm for this spiritual identification. The first portrait rendered is, "Sula was a heavy brown (sic) with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose."[86] The **eye** is Sula's mark that designates her as one of Morrison's "marked" heroes in much the same way as Sethe's back in Beloved and Pilate's smooth stomach in Song of Solomon. In another sense, the eye, itself a circle, is symbolic of the many broken circles: the friendship circle between Nell and Sula; the circle of community; and the family circle represented by the ancestor.

The eye is a fitting symbol for Sula because, like Oya who refuses definition, it defies description as well. Her emblematic eye represents a kind of double vision; it sums up her deviation from the imposed definitions in the "eyes" of the community and helps to define the character of the perceiver. Teapot's mother sees Hannah's ashes[87] symbolic of her own maternal deficiency. Nel's children see it as a" scary black thing" which foreshadows the chaos caused by their parent's separation. Also, Jude sees the mark over her

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[86]Morrison, Sula 57.

[87]Morrison, Sula 114.

eye as a rattlesnake[88] revealing much about his fears. Hallissey explains, "Women do not see themselves as poison ladies; men see them that way."[89] Hallissey states that all the misogynistic notions related to the images are manifestations of male fear of domination by a woman. The envenomed or serpentine woman in particular becomes a strong metaphor for the woman who is too unusual for the ordinary man to handle.[90] Shortly after seeing Sula for the first time, Jude's fears of being dominated by Nell are resolved because he is empowered by his infidelity with Sula to break free from the oppressive bonds of Nell's dependent love. Of primary significance is Shadrack's perception of her eye as a "tadpole".[91] A sure sign of her spiritual nature and connection to him that substantiates her identity as an initiate of the river Orisha like himself. For Shadrack, the marked eye (circle) connects her to the ancestors, rivers, and death.

A dominant description of Sula that fixes her metaphysical identity is the physical description of her upon her return to the "village" of Medallion.

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[88]Morrison, Sula 104.

[89]Hallissy xiv.

[90]Hallissy xiv.

[91]Morrison, Sula 156.

Described as a brown woman wearing "A black crepe dress," and "a black felt hat with the veil of net lowered over one eye[92] Sula's appearance is congruous with the description of Oya who is the benefactor and mentor of the egungun or masked ancestral spirits who parade through town reminding the villagers of the permanency of life as well as reminding them to attend to their own individual ancestors. A passage by Gleason illuminates the deeper meaning of Sula's promenade through town:

> The function of the Egungun cult is to bring the Ancestor back to life in masquerade form in order to "legitimate reigning authority" this is done at the annual festival for the dead.[93]

The significance of Sula's black dress is signified by Gleason:

> Oya's protective gesture with the black cloth tears social reality to shreds. Like a glandular secretion, it touches us at the instinctual level of defense. It renders us temporarily "beside ourselves" and therefore impervious to attack.[94]

Her arrival prefigures the social reality to be shredded in the community and the housewives respond to the sign by "throwing buckets of water on their

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[92]Morrison, Sula 90. Note that because Oya is the patron of the Egungun masqueraders she is represented in the Yoruba culture as a great mask (Gleason 73).

[93]Gleason 70.

[94]Gleason 50.

sidewalks" and generates Eva comments,"I might have knowed them birds meant something."[95] Philip Niemark makes a comparison to Oya's personality and the tornado that she represents. He says, "Riding low in the storm-laden sky, she will suddenly dip and leave absolute waste where something apparently solid and substantial stood just moments before."[96]

Another characteristic that confirms Sula's association with Oya is the phenomenon of death. Death abounds in the novel and serves as the dominant image informing both structure and content. The novel's prologue and epilogue both refer to death. Barbara Christian examines the significance of this motif. She states:

> Death occurs in each chapter and is the beginning of, or climax of, the experience in that particular section of the novel. Death becomes a way of focusing experience. As each year gives ways to another, so each death gives way to a new view of life, a new discovery, a new feeling for truth.[97]

Christian's observations about death and its relationship to life are consistent with Gleason's: "Oya is a conundrum. She is a double goddess: not here

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[95]Morrison, Sula 91.

[96]Philip John Niemark, The Way of The Orisa: Empowering Your Life Through The Ancient African Religion of Ifa (New York: Harper-Collins, 1993) 127.

[97]Christian, Black Women 154.

but there, not there but here; on the side of death, on the side of life."[98]

This doubling effect can be seen in the symbolic deaths such as the demise of Nell and Sula's friendship, the dissolution of Nell and Jude's marriage, and the separation between Eva and Sula. Moreover, there are actual deaths many of which are connected to Sula in significant ways: Hannah and Plum both die by burnings; Chicken Little drowns; Mr. Finley chokes on a chicken bone; and many of the townspeople are killed in a culminating ritual at the end of the novel following Sula's death.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of death, the permanence of life is symbolized by the circles that recur as a leitmotif and "surround" the actual deaths. This circling serves to unite both the presence of the Orisha and the idea of the permanence of life. Right before Hannah's death, the circling motif appears when she is preparing green beans for dinner "She swirled them about with her fingers, poured the water off and repeated the process."[99] In addition, to this image of circling, Hannah's death represents another kind of circle Eva's love and anger and Sula's anger. Sula is intimated in her mother's death since she calmly

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[98]Gleason 51.

[99]Morrison, Sula 72.

watches her mother's "fire dance" "because she was interested."[100] Again a passage in Gleason explains Eva's and Sula's possible participation in this deadly alliance:

> She is connected to water as tempest and rain. She is connected to air as air-in-motion, which tears roofs off houses and fells trees; but her essence is fire, fire-in-motion, lightning. This relation to movement and fire make her divinity of women who lead intense erotic lives.[101]

This woman--daughter, town whore, and mother is dead and it is left up to the reader to reach a conclusion as to the cause(s) of her death.

The third ritualized death in the novel is the death of Chicken Little. Prior to Chicken Little's death Sula is at an emotional crossroads in her life signified by both her puberty and her anger on having overheard her mother say, "I just don't like her."[102] Sula then heads down to the river accompanied by her "dark thoughts."[103] Morrison carefully crafts the scene that leads up to Chicken Little's death with subtle prose that prepares the reader for the ritual sacrifice of Chicken Little. In the preparatory stage

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[100]Morrison, Sula 78.

[101]Gleason 291.

[102]Morrison, Sula 57.

[103]Morrison, Sula 57.

of the ritual Elegba is invoked as customary in his capacity as a mediator. Gleason explains:

> Eshu-Elegba is the Orisha of thresholds and crossroads, the intermediary, the messenger, the trickster, associated with the obligatory sacrifice and also regressive behavior. Indispensable and primary presence to be invoked and placated before ritual occurrence or crucial personal decision making.[104]

His invocation is manifested by the activity engaged in by Sula and Nell immediately prior to Chicken Little's appearance:[105]

> Sula lifted her head and joined Nel in the grass play. In concert, without ever meeting each other's eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. When a generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig. At first Nel was content to do the same. But soon she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the last manipulation of her twig. . . Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. When the depression was the size of small dishpan, Nell's twig broke. With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too. Nel saw a bottle cap and tossed it in as well. Each then looked around for more debris to throw into the hole: paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they could find

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[104]Gleason 305.

[105]One of the predominant animals used in ritual sacrifices to Oya is the cock or hen (Gleason 78).

> were collected there. Carefully they replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass. Neither had spoken a word.[106]

The twig is associated with Elegba who is represented by trees whose vertical trunks and horizontal branches signify this Orisha of the crossroads. The cigarette represents the tobacco that is used to purify and protect. It is usually offered to Elegba as part of the ritual sacrifice.[107]

After this ritual of "stripping" symbolic of the ancestral cycle complete with the burial ritual, Sula sees Chicken Little "coming up from the lower bank of the river."[108] Sula then coaxes him to climb the tree with her and they look out over the "far side of the river."[109] After they descend, "Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around"[110] until he slips out of her hands and lands

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[106]Morrison, Sula 58-59.

[107]Interesting to note is one of the spiritual properties associated with tobacco. Mickaharic says, "It can be used with a sincere prayer to rid yourself of the ability to cast the evil eye on others." The ritual described by Mickaharic says that one should "break up a cigarette and use the tobacco." Draja Mickaharic, Spiritual Cleansing: A Handbook of Psychic Protection (Bronx, New York: Jamil Products, 1985) 74.

[108]Morrison, Sula 59.

[109]Morrison, Sula 59.

[110]Morrison, Sula 60.

in the river. When he sinks, Chicken Little's body causes circular ripples in the river that testify to his existence. Having performed the ritual whether "intentionally" or not, Sula is forever changed and heads deliberately toward her own end.

As dramatic as the other deaths are, Sula's death and the circumstances that prefigure it point to its primary significance in the novel. The attending details create a surreal atmosphere:

> It would be here, only here, held by this blind window high above the elm tree, that she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels, just missing the dark walls, down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always. Always.[111]

"Always," this word spoken on her death-bed recalls the guidance given her by Shadrack concerning the permanence of life. The words spoken after her "death," "Wait till I tell Nell"[112] attests to her ability to communicate between worlds and demonstrates the possibilities of a future even at the end. This also confirms her identity as Oya, who is able to transcend death.

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[111]Morrison, Sula 149.

[112]Morrison, Sula 149.

Sula's death associated with her rejection of the ancestor is further explained by the African belief in the metaphysical cause of illness. It is held that an illness can be symptomatic of an outraged ancestor. Illness can be caused by failure to render service and to offer the requisite sacrifices, afford the reverence, and to give the expected offerings. Morrison says, "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself".[113] This ancestral transgression of Sula's can be examined by both her transgression against the ancestral presence represented by A. Jacks (Ajax's) knowledge of traditional spiritual practices and the rejection of Eva as a familial ancestor.

Because of Sula's failure to recognize the spiritual nature of Ajax, this earthy man with skin of "black loam," she is doomed. Introduced early in the novel as the "twenty-one-year-old pool haunt of sinister beauty" with the most imaginative foul mouth in the town,[114] he re-enters her life after her sexual escapade with Jude. For Sula, the memory of his "lemon-yellow" pants which had caused her sexual excitement some years earlier ignites the relationship. To Ajax, Sula represents the only other woman who is interesting "other than his mother who sat in her shack

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[113]Morrison, "Rootedness" 344.

[114]Morrison, Sula 50.

with six younger sons working roots."[115] He comes often bringing her various gifts, of which the "clusters of blackberries" are the most significant.[116] Once he begins coming regularly, Sula, becomes dependent and things begin to change. Suspecting that Sula has put "roots on him" this "flying man" and "seventh son of a seventh son"[117] starts to think more and more about "air shows," "planes," and flying with regularity to counter the "fresh white sheets" and "deadly odor of freshly applied cologne."[118] Hallissey explains:

> When a man goes into a house, seen as a woman's domain, he is in need of relief and refuge. "He takes what he needs (food, warmth, shelter, rest, sex) and power is restored. The triumph of the male is to take

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[115]Morrison, Sula 126.

[116]This recurring motif was first introduced in The Bluest Eye and repeated in Beloved. In Beloved, the blackberries picked by Stamp Paid help to initiate the major tension in the community. The resentment in Baby Suggs' being able to "take two buckets of blackberries and make ten maybe twelve pies. . . "(137) makes the community members jealous and they purposefully lower their guard and allow strangers to come into Baby Suggs' yard. Blackberries are significant elements used in metaphysical practices and the performance of "magic."

[117]This idea of the "seventh son of a seventh son" is a recurring motif in African American literature that signifies one who is "charmed." In Gloria Naylor's, Mama Day, the heroine, Cocoa is the descendant of a woman who is the granddaughter of a "son of a seventh son" and is therefore able to escape harm when "roots" are put on her.

[118]Morrison, Sula 134.

> the things that he needs and to remain free of the female's domination.[119]

Fearing domination. Ajax summons that part of him that could be vengeful.[120] The following passage which describes his mother indicates his capabilities or access to the resources to act out his vengeance:

> She was an evil conjure woman, blessed with seven adoring children whose joy it was to bring her the plants, hair, underclothing, fingernail parings, white hens, blood, camphor, pictures, kerosene and footstep dust that she needed, as well as to order Van Van, High John the Conqueror, Little John to Chew, Devil's Shoe String, Chinese Wash, Mustard Seed and the Nine Herbs from Cincinnati. She knew about the weather, omens, the living, the dead, dreams and all illnesses and made a modest living with her skills.[121]

Mintz and Price confirm, "Witches act from envy or jealousy and use power to cause illness and to kill."[122] Add to the list of envy and jealousy any other component from the arsenal of human emotion and there is the making of a "hex." It is therefore feasible that whether acting alone or in collusion with his mother, Ajax is able to free himself from Sula's influence. Shortly after he leaves, Sula dies.

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[119]Hallissy 3.

[120]Morrison, Sula 128.

[121]Morrison, Sula 126.

[122]Mintz and Price 126.

Sula's death indicates at such an early age and without reference to a previous illness alerts the reader that a major spiritual transgression has occurred. In traditional African society, "Punishments and retribution for breaches in morals and ethics were not the province of a future world judge but were dealt with on earth."[123]

The next transgression committed by Sula is directed at Eva. Sula's blatant disrespect for Eva is exhibited on two fronts, by word and deed.[124] Sula's verbal transgression indicates her incapacity to grasp the hierarchy of the relationship, one that clearly places Eva before her as a representation of the ancestor to be duly honored and revered. Notwithstanding that one of the profound aspects of Oya's personality is her sharp tongue,[125] this does not exonerate her from her offence. The following

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[123]Margaret Washington Creel, "Gullah Attitudes Toward Life and Death," Africanisms in American Culture. ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1992) 72.

[124]Gleason notes that a person with strong àse "has authority inspiring word and deed" (304). Sula's failed quest is directly related to this reversal or misuse of this spiritual power.

[125] Gleason explains that the small piece of lightning that Oya kept for herself after giving the bulk to Shango (Chango) was hidden under her tongue for safekeeping and to guard against the day that she would need a secret weapon to defend herself. The symbol that represents this lightning is a small pair of swords that are usually displayed on her altar. Gleason 65.

conversation highlights the rupture in this intergenerational relationship caused by the sharpness of Sula's double-edged weapon. Eva who is already apprehensive of Sula since the time she (Sula) watched Hannah burn just "because she was interested",[126] questions her about getting married. "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you." To this Sula responds, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."[127] When Sula argues that she did not want to make any children and that she wanted only to make herself she **cuts** herself off from the ancestor. Eva cannot depend on Sula to call her name into eternity and Sula will leave no one to call her name either.[128]

Sula is also ungrateful. This is demonstrated when she tells Eva, " don't talk to me about how much you gave me, Big Mamma, and how much I owe you or none of that.[129] Their conversation continues:

> Sula sat up. "I need you to shut your mouth."

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[126]Morrison, Sula 78.

[127]Morrison, Sula 92.

[128]The relationship of women to the community is determined to large extent by the number of children produced to carry out the physical work, but also of great importance, the work of the ancestors.

[129]Morrison, Sula 92.

"Don't nobody talk to me like that. Don't nobody..."

"This body does. Just 'cause you was bad enough to cut off your own leg you think you got a right to kick everybody with the stump"

"Hold on, you lyin' heifer!"

"I aim to."

"Bible say honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee."

"Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days wasn't so long."

"Pus mouth! God's going to strike you!"

"Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?"

"Hellfire don't need lightin' and it's already burning in you..."

"Whatever's burning in me is mine!""Amen!""And I'll split this town in two and everything in it before I'll let you put it out!

""You throwed yours away."

"It's mine to throw."

"One day you gone need it."

"Maybe one night when you dozing in that wagon flicking flies and swallowing spit, maybe I'll just tip on up here with some kerosene and-who knows-you may make the brightest flame of them all."[130]

Soon after, Sula, devoid of familial loyalty, puts the matriarch of the Peace family in a senior citizen home. This serves as her final breach with the ancestor. In, The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu

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[130]Morrison, Sula 93.

Ritual, Victor Turner identifies the ancestors and the consequences of not duly honoring them: "These ancestors are always the spirits of those who played a prominent part in the lifetime of the persons they are troubling." [131] Turner submits that the reason these ancestors trouble the person(s) is because they have been forgotten. This negligence could occur because the person neglected a food offering, failed to mention their names, or has forgotten the dead in their heart. Another reason for the ancestor's annoyance is because the living are acting in ways in which they (ancestor's) disapprove.[132] Clearly Sula's behavior warrants disapproval.

What is paradoxical about Sula's behavior, however, is that she is the person who is punished for neglect of her ancestral duties and yet she is also the person who is chosen to be the go-between in future rituals that would connect the living with the dead.[133] She earns this distinction because she represents spiritual strength in the persona of the archetypal female warrior, Oya, in the same manner as Eva. In fact, she could have been a strong as Eva and

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[131]Victor Turner. The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1967) 10.

[132]Turner 10.

[133]Turner 10.

a replacement for her had she the ability to sacrifice for others.

Like her grandmother, Sula amputates a piece of herself. She cuts off a piece of her forefinger to frighten the white boys who torment her on her way home and from school:

> When the girls were three feet in front of the boys, Sula reached into her coat pocket and pulled out Eva's paring knife. The boys stopped short, exchanged looks and...Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger.[134]

Her self-mutilation acts as a initiation rite proving her courage much in the same way as her grandmother did when she amputated her leg to provide for her family. The **àse** or active essence analogous to Bantu *NOMMO* is activated in Sula when she cut the tip of her finger off and says to the boys, "If I can do that to myself, what do you suppose I'll do to you?"[135] This blood sacrifice, "a scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood. . ."[136] activates the **àse** in Sula and prepares her for her journey as Iyawo Oya (Oya initiate; literally bride of Oya).

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[134]Morrison, Sula 54.

[135]Morrison, Sula 54-55.

[136]Morrison, Sula 54.

However, Sula fails because she has no ancestor to invoke and no one to intercede on her behalf to insure her fulfillment. Properly invoked, the ancestor functions to secure spiritual and psychic protection for a person. Because of Sula's excommunication from the ancestor she cannot fulfill her heroic mission and at the same time the community is further disintegrated. The group integrates individuals and in turn the individual members must submit to the will of the group in order to have integrity. One of the attributes of the heroes in the African epics is that sometimes they demonstrate behavior inconsistent with the community's expectations.[137] This can have serious consequences as African ideas of self place importance on group status in order to define who the individual is.[138] As I have demonstrated in the preceding discussion on African world thought, the needs and concerns of groups are morally superior to those of individuals. The individual who breaches this order by placing personal advantages at the expense of others, can cause others to experience misfortune, disease, and death.

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[137]Biebuyck, Hero and Chief 68.

[138]Godfrey Leinhardt, "Self: Public, Private. Some African Representations," The Category of The Person, eds. Michael Carrithers, Stephen Collins, and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1985).

Denial of her ancestor and community responsibilities makes Sula a scapegoat and a misfit in the community. This judgement is rendered from a traditional group of people who do not "believe doctors could heal" or that "death was accidental."[139] Morrison does not let their assessments of Sula become dismissed as small town meddling. She informs the reader by means of the omniscient narrator that they were accurate in their conclusions about Sula; she was different. Sula's independence and me-ness was not seen as a desirable trait to posses in the mid-twentieth century as evidenced by other character's reactions to her. With Eva in an old folk's home, (something unfathomable),[140] Sula sleeping with the married men of the town, and generally doing what she pleases, the ire of the townspeople is raised. They whisper that if she could do some of the things that she does, she probably sleeps with "white men"--the ultimate in transgression. The members of the community feel there was "nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier[141] The community rejects her:

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[139]Morrison, Sula 90.

[140]Cooper-Clark 194.

[141]Morrison, Sula 113. In Beloved, Ella Jones refers to the "white man" who had raped her as "the lowest yet" (258-259). The people in the Medallion community accuse her of voluntarily sleeping with "white men" and in so doing are making a similar statement about Sula.

> All minds were closed to her when that word was passed around. It made the old women draw their lips together; made small children look away from her in shame; made young men fantasize elaborate torture for her-just to get the saliva back in their mouths when they saw her.[142]

None of this phases her and she makes no attempt to salvage her ruined reputation. Her return to Medallion heralded by the "plague of robins" provides the community members with a phenomenon with which to "bend their minds to its will." The narrator remarks on their handling of this sign:

> In spite of their fear, they reacted to an oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, fulfill itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again.[143]

They engage whatever comes their way with a unified presence of purpose. The townspeople move from spiteful gossiping about her to attempts at conjures," they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps," and collected "dust from her footsteps"[144] She became the catalyst which motivated them to get themselves together. When Teapot, a

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[142]Morrison, Sula 112.

[143]Morrison, Sula 89-90.

[144]Morrison, Sula 113.

neglected boy whose mother frequented the pool hall, knocked on Sula's door to inquire if she had any bottles, his fall off the porch was attributed to Sula, more specifically to her "evil eye."

Similarly, as with Shadrack a body of lore develops around Sula and in this way, as an individual, she is engaged into the local organization. When Mr. Finley chokes on a chicken bone and died, this too was attributed to Sula, more specifically with her evil eye. Likewise when a woman gets a sty on her eye after looking at her, Sula is blamed.[145] Moreover as with Baby Suggs in Beloved, Sula is judged to have powers superior to "mortals" which places in the highest suspicion. The townsfolk note, "on picnics neither gnats nor mosquitoes would settle on her," "she had no childhood diseases," and "when Sula drank beer she never belched."[146]

In keeping with the inherent contradictions espoused by the idea that the "dead are alive" Morrison presents another equally conflicting one; Sula has both and destructive and a constructive presence. While Sula's behavior after she returns to the Bottom outrages her community making her a pariah, ironically, her presence generally has a beneficial effect on the

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[145]Morrison, Sula 117.

[146]Morrison, Sula 115.

Bottom. Sula's evilness highlights everyone's goodness. Her influence is not totally evil[147] as the people of Medallion re-direct their scattered energies into family matters using Sula's lack of familial concerns as a point of departure. Morrison notes the manner in which African American folk handle things:

> Its an animated world in which trees can be outraged and hurt, and in which the presence or absence of birds is meaningful. You have to be very still to understand these so-called signs, in addition to which they inform you about your own behavior. It always interested me, the way in which black people responded to evil. They would protect themselves from it, they would avoid it, they might even be terrified of it, but it wasn't as though it were abnormal. I used the line "as though God had four faces instead of three..." Evil was a natural presence in the world. What that meant in terms of human behavior was that when they saw someone disgraceful, they would not expel them in the sense of tarring and killing. I think that's a distinct cultural difference, because the Western notion of evil is to annihilate it. They may be very cleansing, but it's also highly intolerant.[148]

Sula becomes the catalyst that motivates them to get their lives together. After slandering Sula by bringing forth invented indictments, the townspeople were then free to conduct their lives with renewed

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[147]In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison says that "Evil is not an alien force; its just a different force" (Tate 129). She comments that Sula's evil is not absolute because it does have some positive influences on the community.

[148]Ruas 9.

vigor as the "presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over."[149]

The narrator states:

> Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst.[150]

An example of this renewed concern is when Teapot, the five-year-old son of an indifferent mother accidentally fell off the Sula's porch. The mother who before Teapot's mishap frequented the local pool hall, immerses herself in a role for which she had shown no previous inclination. "The very idea of a grown woman hurting her boy kept her teeth on edge. She became the most devoted mother: sober, clean and industrious."[151]

Sula is not entirely oblivious to what is going on. She offers a judgement about the town, "Half this town need it [killing]" and "a drawn-out disease."[152] Sula also recognizes that she is the motivation for their changed behavior and that hers is the "one clear

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[149]Morrison, Sula 118.

[150]Morrison, Sula 117.

[151]Morrison, Sula 114.

[152]Morrison, Sula 96.

young eye that kept the knife away from the throat's curve"[153]

After having embraced the role of moral guardians as a rebuttal to Sula's definition, it is only fitting that after Sula dies that the townspeople go back to their previous ways:

> Teapot, for example, went into the kitchen and asked his mother for some sugar-butter-bread. She got up to fix it and found that she had no butter, only oleomargarine. Too tired to mix the saffron-colored powder into the hard cake of oleo, she simply smeared the white stuff on the bread and sprinkled the sugar over it. Teapot tasted the difference and refused to eat it. This keenest of insults that a mother can feel, the rejection by a child of her food, bent her into a fury and she beat him as she had not done since Sula knocked him down the steps. She was not alone. Other mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made.[154]

Without Sula as a scapegoat they are free to revert to their unaffected identities.

After her death, even though the community assumes its former shape, the "village" is troubled. This trouble is attributed to many things, but more specifically to the cultural ruptures that have occurred in the novel. These ruptures are represented

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[153]Morrison, Sula 122.

[154]Morrison, Sula 153.

by events such as people going to "white folk's" hospitals or elders being placed in nursing homes, and seers not attending to the importance of dreams. What the community needs is the harnessing of forces to balance the negative influences in the form of ritual acts.[155] Mintz and Price remind us that freedom and individuality are always balanced by a sense of purpose and community, and these in turn are balanced by natural and supernatural powers channeled through a series of rites to clear the atmosphere of pollution.[156] Since ritual is designed to keep the believers spiritually clean, renewed, and centered they appeal to the voices of nature. However, they are unaware of the symbolic underpinnings that drives their need for ceremony. They are compelled to act in a communal way to fashion a proper burial for Sula to create harmony and repair the disjunction.

The need to propitiate the "forces" responsible for "the restless irritability" that "took hold"[157] is of chief importance in the minds of the community members. The signs appear after Sula's death send mixed signals that the townspeople misinterpret. The first sign was that there was going to be abundant work

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[155]Mintz and Price 134.

[156]Mintz and Price 131-132.

[157]Morrison, Sula 153.

on the New River Road tunnel (life). "The second sign was the construction begun on an old people's home (death).[158] The third sign was the freezing rain (stillness). The narrator explains the obfuscation of the signs, "Still it was not those illnesses or even the ice that marked the beginning of the trouble, that self-fulfilled prophecy that Shadrack carried on his tongue. . . there was something wrong. . .[159]
I suggest that because there is no rebirth in the novel, one of the prerequisites for eternity and continuation of the ancestral line, this collective ritual provides the renewal necessary to re-establish harmony.[160] The central purpose of ritual is to impose patterns of behavior upon the individual in the interest of the whole group.

Having no other resources except National Suicide Day to deal with the evil visited upon the town by the harsh winter, they shape their exigency into this established ritual. The purpose of the ritual is not only to pacify the spirits for relief for the winter; it is also a ritual sacrifice for Oya in the character of Sula.

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[158]Morrison, Sula 151.

[159]Morrison, Sula 153.

[160]Soyinka 137.

Since rituals are usually conducted by a priest or priestess, Shadrack as a spiritual practitioner is called upon to adjudicate the improprieties of the community. Shadrack is no stranger to Sula; his connection to her is evidenced by the belt left behind on her visit to his cabin.[161] Another symbolic connection that ties Sula to Shadrack is that they both symbolically represent death and life for the community.[162] It was Shadrack who had supplied Sula with the mantra, "always", used to evoke the ancestral idea. "He had said 'always' to convince her, assure her, of permanency."[163] He recognizes that although Sula had crossed over into "a sleep of water always," there is still need for a culminating ritual.

It has been noted in Chapter Three that funerals as culminating events are equally as important for the

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[161]The purple and white belt left behind when Sula visited his shack immediately following her sacrifice of Chicken Little symbolically ties Sula to Shadrack as a river initiate. In the Yoruba religion each level of ritual connects you to other members of the spiritual community in symbolically profound ways. For example, if one makes a (blood or death) sacrifice for Elegba and is given his symbolic effigy in the form of a clay "head" that has been ritually prepared according to the oracle, this person belongs to that group of "knowers." He or she is allowed to dance in the circle when the drummers play Elegba's rhythms at communal celebrations. There are other privileges accorded as well.

[162]Cedric Gael Bryant, "The Orderliness of Disorder: Madness and Evil in Toni Morrison's Sula," Black American Literature Forum 24 (1990): 734.

[163]Morrison, Sula 157.

living as well as the dead. Throughout the centuries of ordeal, African people in America have found the means to survive by maintaining the spiritual ties with the forces of nature. In fact, this is the basis for their spirituality. James notes this connection with funerary practices:

> The care taken, however, in the disposal of the dead, the protection and treatment of the body, its adornment with life giving amulets and substances like ocher and shells, the provision of food, fires and grave-goods generally, accompanied sometimes by re-burial and the preservation and ritual treatment of the skull, taken collectively are indicative of a respect and regard for the departed going beyond fear of their return to harm the survivors, though this element in the funerary ritual cannot be ignored. But for the sake of everybody concerned, the living and the dead, it was important that those who left the world should be effectively installed in the mysterious after-life as otherwise they were always liable to avenge any neglect in the due performance of the mortuary rites.[164]

Sula was not "funeralized properly"[165] as indicated by the attendance of only the few who were brave enough to "to witness the burial of a witch" and sing "Shall We

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[164]E.O. James, Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East: An Archeological and Documentary Study (New York: Praeger, 1958) 35.

[165]Because Sula's death has not had the attending communal "drama" of "wake-keeping" and other ritual behavior there is a great need to ritualize her properly. In addition, in Sula's case, this is especially important, as Ella reminds us in Beloved, "You know as well as I do that people who die bad don't stay in the ground" (188).

Gather at the River" for politeness' sake.[166] The song, "Shall We Gather at the River?" becomes a question linked to the spiritual realm associated with ritual and prefigures the ritual at the mouth of the cave where members are sacrificially killed in the baptism of water. The community overlooks this important activity. There were no "yellow cakes" sent, no one "left their quilt patches in disarray to run to the house."[167] And there were those who "said, when they heard she was dying, "She ain't dead yet?"[168] In addition to the lack of respect shown Sula by the community, Sula was taken to a "white" funeral home. Although it was "all done elegantly," the coffin was closed.[169]

So, Shadrack accompanied by Tar Baby and the deweys (sic) who represent the lesser spirits--the intermediaries that give "assurance of human perpetuity

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[166]Morrison, Sula 150.

[167]Morrison, Sula 172.

[168]Morrison, Sula 172.

[169]Morrison, Sula 173. Historically, African American's have their own funerary practices that consists of accompanying spiritual preparations practiced by the undertaker/priest/priestesses which provide the "dead" with the appropriate send-off to eternity. Moreover, of principal import is the final viewing of the body which allows the community to say goodbye face to face.

beyond the grave"[170] send Sula off in traditional fashion. On January third, a new moon day, Shadrack officiates this culminating ritual--this final enactment of "National Suicide Day." This was the last "time he would invite them to end their lives neatly and sweetly." Shadrack does not give the ritual his usual attention because of his anguish over Sula's death. The narrator explains:

> He walked over the rickety bridge and on into the Bottom. But it was not heartfelt this time, not loving this time, for he no longer cared whether he helped them or not. His rope was improperly tied; his bell had a

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[170]Creel, 73. Their identities as intermediaries of Oya are hinted at through their description. The deweys are described as three boys who under the influence of Eva have merged into one personality. "They spoke with one voice, thought with one mind, and maintained an annoying privacy" (39). They have even begun to look alike so that even their mothers cannot tell them apart. This transformation and their identity is suggested by the meaning of their collective name. The word dew derives from the Indo-European base that produced words that meant **flow**, **run**, **wash**, and **brook**. At the culminating ritual in the novel, they are presumed dead because their bodies were not found (162). Failure to find their bodies implies they have returned to their source. These deweys, "who went wild at the thought of water" (74) are actually water spirits. The next "helper" is Tar Baby described as a "white man" who because of Eva's description becomes a "black man" who is able to live off air and music (69). His job also identifies him as a devotee, "he worked in a poultry market, and after wringing the necks of chickens all day, he came home and drank until he slept" (40). He sent the deweys out for his liquor and spent most of his time in a heap on the floor or sitting in a chair staring at the wall (40). He was perpetually "steeped in **wine**" (146).

> tinny unimpassioned sound. His visitor was dead and would come no more.[171]

Irrespective of his lack of enthusiasm, Shadrack attracts more than his usual few. This time he is able to enlist, Dessie, Tar Baby, Patsy, Mr. Buckland Reed, Teapot's Mama, Valentine and many others. He is not, however, able to persuade those "who understood the Spirit's touch which made them dance, who understood whole families bending their backs in a field while singing as from one throat, who understood the ecstasy of river baptisms under suns just like this one."[172]

Those that did go met their end while Shadrack stood there ringing his bell. "Having forgotten his song and his rope, he just stood there high up on the bank ringing, ringing his bell."[173] Through the use of water imagery, river, the reader is led to the contemplation of eternal possibilities:

> A lot of them died there. The earth, now warm, shifted. . . They found themselves in a chamber of water, deprived of the sun that had brought them there. . . Tar Baby, Dessie, Ivy, Valentine, the Herrod boys, some of Ajax's younger brothers and the deweys (at least it was supposed; their bodies were never found)-all died there.[174]

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[171]Morrison, Sula 158.

[172]Morrison, Sula 160.

[173]Morrison, Sula 162.

[174]Morrison, Sula 162.

At the novel's end, half the town is dead, there is limited hope for the future and Eva's life has been rendered finite as the sole survivor of the Peace family. Because Sula has failed to achieve fulfillment there is no one to call Eva's name into eternity. Sula's excommunication from the community, the ancestor and her inability to understand that she couldn't do it alone without moorings and responsibility leave behind "circles and circles of sorrow."[175]

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[175] Morrison, Sula 174.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

We need our own myths and legends to regain our lost self-esteem, our regard for each other as a people working together to move the mountains that stand before us.

John Oliver Killens--
Black Man's Burden

Using the narrative as a ruse, Morrison confronts issues of culture in a distinctive manner balancing both artistic and folk elements. Through the act of "telling" she reaffirms the significant role that culture holds in the African American literary canon. The heroic journeys, analyzed in this study demonstrate Morrison's ability to establish cultural myths. The result of which is the elevation of self-esteem and consciousness in African Americans. Like the conjurer who possesses exceptional powers to manipulate and control the environment, Morrison demonstrates the ability to bring her African sensibilities to bear and inform the literary terrain. As a cultural custodian, the power she wields is not for herself alone, but is a gift to her readers. As a prose queen, she assumes an authoritative stance by presenting a revised identity divined by the oracle of cultural experience.

Going beyond textual realities, her work represents a recovery of the past. Moreover, she goes beyond folkloric structures that only suggest the original mythological frame and provide actual cultural elements housed in text that is opulently crafted. Using words as weapons to enable her readers to fight against humiliation and despair, she resurrects the spiritual and cultural practices of African people in a demonstrably authentic manner. It could be argued that her rendering of African mythic realities is not a manifestation of the profundity of African cultural continuities, but instead attests to her literary acumen and deliberate craftsmanship. Nevertheless, irrespective of the actual intent of Morrison, it remains that the motifs she employs validate the culture of African Americans and make piercing statements concerning the identity of these African people. In that sense she, like all who participate in this dynamic, is a maker of culture.

In response to cultural urgency and the need for culture to have agency, Morrison mounts a strong cultural offensive and is consistent with the precepts of the African view delineated in Chapter Two. From her use of cyclical structure to recursive language that creates circles of "truth to keep", it is evident that she is a not only a writer, but a cultural *griotte*

as well. By pointing out the uniqueness of the African experience through the examination of cultural forms a new perception of African people has been rendered.

As a caretaker, Morrison highlights the overriding principle of spiritual culture that informs the larger cultural arena. Her narratives are structured around questions of spiritual dilemmas in contradistinction to quests that are defined by the acquisition of material wealth. Spirituality, a vehicle for communication with the supernatural, adheres to authentic African practices. In Beloved and Sula, Morrison makes strong assertions about continuities with her focus on the Yoruba religion along with its other syncretic manifestations such as Lecumi (Cuba), Candomblé (Brazil), and Santería (Puerto Rico). Using innovations to nourish existing traditions, Morrison testifies to the fundamental importance of life defined by spirit. In her narratives, the hero is encouraged to connect to the primary spiritual circles that define the arena of life, the ancestral and community circles. Morrison maintains that it is only by tapping into that source of power that people are able to come full-circle to themselves.

A clear example of this return to "self" is evident in Sethe's fulfillment in Beloved. Although, at the novel's end she is not completely fulfilled, she

is well on her way to a full recovery having been revitalized by the combined forces of the community and the evoked ancestral presence of Baby Suggs.

Morrison's uses the tropes of memory and the force of *NOMMO* to engender ancestral presence and gives her readers the formula for doing the same. This ability to conjure using the spoken word is a consistent theme in contemporary African American women's writing and confirms its relevance as a major thread in the literary quilt. There is "Great Gram" who informs Ursa in Gayl Jones' Corregidora, "Mama Day" who saves Cocoa through spiritual intervention in Gloria Naylor's Mama Day, and "Mammy" in Dessa Rose who spiritually mentors her with notions of spiritual decorum, "Never tell a dream until you broke your fast" and "Put graveyard dirt in your shoes and no dog can track you."[1] Whether this "spoken" word is framed in memory and dream shapes as Paule Marshall demonstrates in Avey Johnson's communion with Aunt Cuney in Praisesong for the Widow or in person as the living ancestral presence of Circe and Pilate in Song of Solomon, the results for the character who "listens" are similar. Avey Johnson's ancestral contact leads her to confront her deeper self as she is guided by Aunt Cuney's words,

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[1] Williams, Dessa Rose 60-61.

"Got your life in my hands/Well well well. . . "[2] Through the power of song, dance and other ancestral echoes that accompany her on her excursion, Avey is rescued from her spiritual anemia and is restored and centered.

African people have been and continue to be strongly influenced by the spirit as a healing model. The ancestral presence in Toni Cade Bambara's, The Salteaters illustrates the idea of ancestral communion that can physically and spiritually heal. The ageless and timeless ancestral presence in the guise of Minnie Ransom, the healer, appears to Velma Henry and asks, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?"[3] Velma hypnotized by the vibration of the humm of Minnie's voice and the power of Minnie's words goes through a myriad of encounters in search of the meaning of that moment. These encounters lead her to past, present and future combined as one reality, as she struggles to resolve her issues. When Velma says yes, the healing begins. In this novel, as in numerous others written by African American women, the acceptance of the ancestor insures self-attainment. The ancestor's presence and words both act as spirit

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[2] Paule Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow (New York: Plume, 1983) 35.

[3] Toni Cade Bambara, The Salteaters (New York: Vintage, 1981) 3.

guides fostering the psychic, physical, and spiritual wholeness of the individual.

To this equation, Bambara like Morrison, adds the idea of community that encircles Velma in the hospital room to guarantee that she will be healed. In a similar way, when Sethe begins to remember Baby Suggs both in word and deed she is able to get on with the rest of her life. Notwithstanding, she is not "liberated" until the community which represents the living circle of tradition, a part of the ancestral legacy, rallies in support of her to exorcise the demon of memory.

Morrison makes strong indictments concerning the primacy of community and the role it plays in fashioning the individual. This is a distinctly African value that Morrison articulates clearly in her works. Morrison is clear that the survival of African American people is predicated on the individual maintaining the traditional practice of communal accountability. This is not only illustrated in Beloved, but in Sula as well. In Sula, Morrison shows the destructive effects of repudiating the traditional structure that nourishes the individual. Sula's quest metamorphosizes into conquest when she becomes oblivious to the duties of maintaining harmony in her environment.

Morrison stresses that one must conform to the principle of *NTU* in order to lead a fulfilled life. Morrison dramatizes recurring scenes from epic sources that illustrate the pitfalls of isolating one's self from the community. By pairing Sula and Eva as foils, Morrison emphasizes the import of her argument. To illustrate, even though Eva is considered to be an unconventional member of the community because of her self-mutilation and her earthy house, she is still accepted because she remains anchored to the community. Evidence of her connection to community is found in the assemblage of roomers, wards (the deweys) and visits from Mr. Buckland Reed. Moreover, in the course of the novel there are no "ill" words uttered by the community about her. In short, the community trusts and accepts her and she responds in kind. This is not the case for Sula.

Not only does Sula fail the community, she fails in the eyes of the ancestor. This blatant disrespect disintegrates her and causes disruption in the overall harmony of her household and the community at large. She is unable to be fulfilled because, as African world view espouses, there is no bridge to carry her over to the other side. Because she has destroyed the means for continuance on the journey, her life excursion is curtailed. As the cultural saying admonishes, "What

goes around, comes around, and what comes around, goes around."

It has been my intent in the discussion of the Beloved and Sula to expose the deeper beliefs that have been maintained by a people physically displaced from their ancestral home. I have attempted to show by directing attention to cultural and spiritual elements such as ritual practices and archetypal characterization including African spiritual agents, that there is a remembrance of Africa in America. This remembrance is discernable with respect to cultural values, philosophy, and spiritual ideas that are consistent with Africa. Through the examination of both the successful quest and the failed quest, a prescription for fulfillment has been tendered that will allow the circle to continue unbroken as Morrison has culturally prepared her readers to meet the future armed with a sense of historicity, perspective, worldview, and consequently a sense of self.

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